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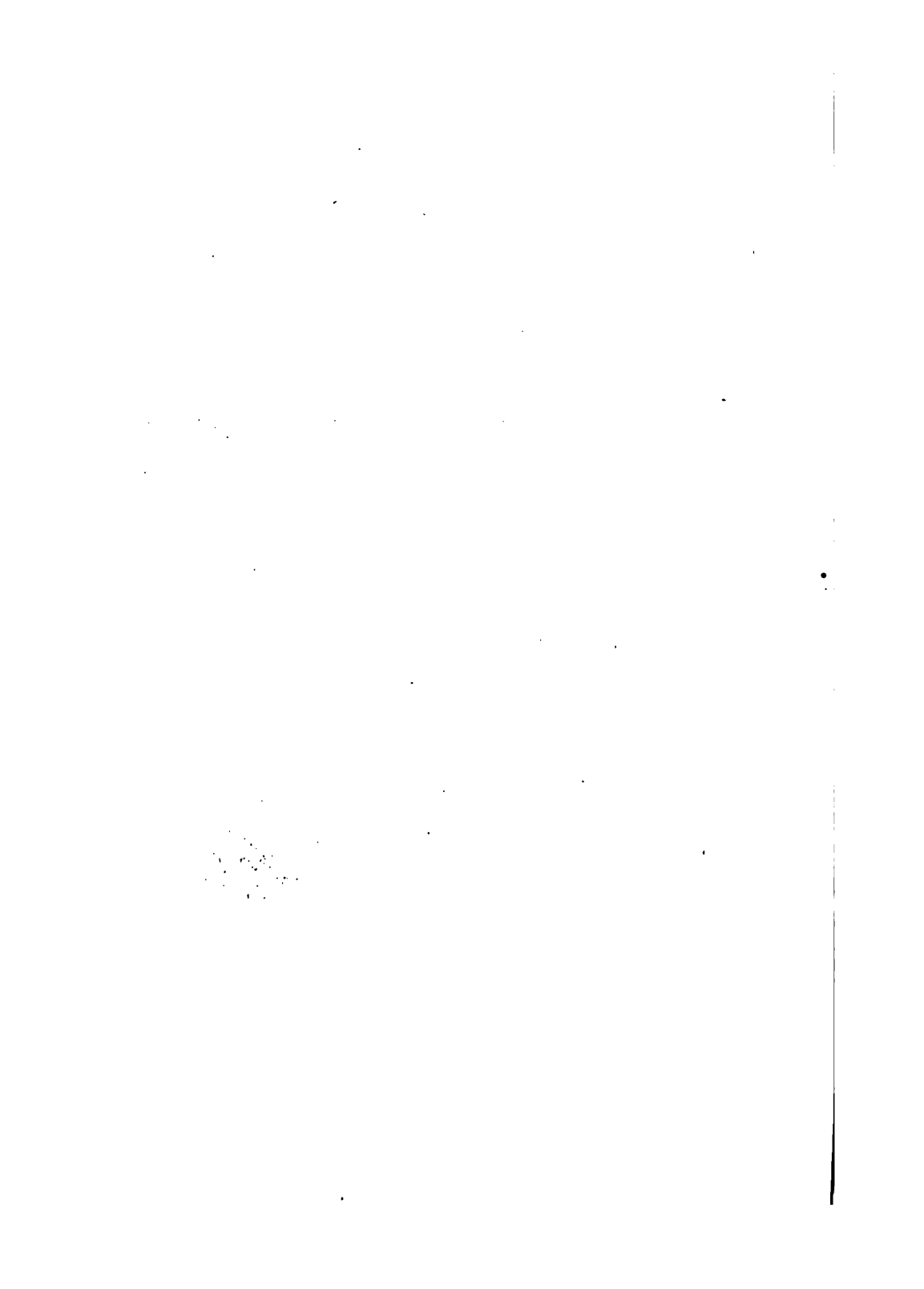
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KISSING THE ROD.

A Novel.

BY

EDMUND YATES,

AUTHOR OF "BROKEN TO HARNESS," "RUNNING THE GAUNTLET,"
"LAND AT LAST," ETC.

"The heart knoweth its own bitterness."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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KISSING THE ROD.

CHAPTER I.

MARTIGNY.

“I WISH you were going to the wedding, dearest Hester,” said Ellen Streightley to Miss Gould, as the two girls stood in attitudes of critical examination before a heap of gay-looking wearing-apparel, which was destined to resolve itself into the costume of a modern bridesmaid.

“You have said that several times already, Ellen,” returned her friend, with a touch of impatience in her voice very unusual to her. “But you know I can’t be at your brother’s wedding, so there is no good wishing about it.”

“Well, I think Robert might have asked Miss

Guyon for an invitation for my dearest friend. I can't understand his standing on such extreme ceremony with her. He really seems afraid of every mortal thing he says and does, lest he may offend her; and I don't think she's bad-tempered either. I'm sure I hope not, for Robert has never had to put up with a bad temper, and he'd be sure to be miserable. O Hester!" said Ellen, with a sudden gush of feeling, "what should we do if she did not make Robert happy!"

Miss Gould replied in rather a hard voice: "But there's no danger of that, is there, Ellen? Miss Guyon is very handsome, and very fashionable, and very clever; and your brother is—what is the proper phrase?—desperately in love with her, is he not?"

"Why, of course he is, Hester; you can see that for yourself."

"And she is desperately in love with him, I suppose?"

"I suppose she is," said Ellen, and this time her tone was impatient; "but no doubt fashionable people have a fashionable way of being in love. I

only know it's not mine, and it is not Decimus's, and I'm glad of it. I wouldn't have him hesitating about what he might and what he might not ask me to do, I can tell you, for any thing. What nonsense it all is, as if Miss Guyon mightn't just as well make your acquaintance now as afterwards! she will know all about you then, I suppose."

Ellen's zeal had outrun her discretion, and told Hester Gould more than she intended; but Hester did not take any notice of the information she had gained, beyond one sudden gleam of anger which shot from her shallow dark eyes.

"Mrs. Streightley is not going?" she said; and the simple girl, whom she could always lead, was as docile as usual, and turned to the new theme, under her guidance.

"No; mamma does not like weddings (she could not even go to Robert's, she says) since my father died. Decimus and I go with Robert; and Mr. Yeldham, he is to be the best man, you know; and the three other bridesmaids are all strangers. Miss Guyon has no near relatives; she is like me

in that, but not like me in having a dear, darling Hester, as good as any sister."

"At least as any sister-in-law, I hope," said Hester with grave emphasis, when she had quietly submitted to the hugging with which Ellen invariably accompanied her effusions of affection.

"Yes, indeed; a thousand times better," she impetuously exclaimed. "I don't think my sister-in-law will ever care much for me, or I for her. She's too grand for me, Hester, and too clever; and when I am with her (the few times I have been), I feel afraid of her, though she is very polite to me; but I had rather she was less polite, and more kind; but I suppose politeness is fashionable, and kindness isn't. As to Decimus, he is quite wretched when he is with her, because he thinks she will make me worldly; but I am sure he needn't be afraid of that, for I shall never like the things she cares about, and I'm sure I shall not care for staying at Middlemeads, even if she asks me."

"It is a beautiful place, is it not?" asked Hester absently.

"Yes, lovely. Only Decimus is quite distressed about the church; it is *high*, you know," and Ellen's voice sank into a mysterious whisper. "He says he will feel such anxiety when I am there, lest it should be a snare to my feet."

"Yes, yes, I know," said Hester, who was apt to weary of the Reverend Decimus's opinions, hopes, fears, and doctrines; "but the house and grounds, I meant. Miss Guyon has seen them, has she not?"

"No, she would not go down, though Lady Henmarsh—(she's a nice woman, Hester, and has a way of making you feel comfortable; and Decimus has hope of her spiritual state),—though she offered to go to Middlemeads, and Robert would have persuaded mamma to go; but it was all no use. And do you know what he said?—I did not like it—he said: 'When Miss Guyon says 'No,' Ellen, it is not you or I who will induce her to change her mind.' I did not care about this, Hester, for my own sake—why should she mind *me*?—but I did think she might alter a purpose for Robert."

Miss Gould smiled—it was not a pleasant smile

—but said nothing ; and then, the dress-parade completed, the two girls went downstairs to the drawing-room, where they found Mrs. Streightley and her reverend son-in-law expectant in placid converse.

Mrs. Streightley had accepted the intelligence of her son's intended marriage, as she accepted every thing in which he was concerned, with perfect confidence and approbation. Miss Guyon was his choice ; she must necessarily be as charming as she was fortunate. Miss Guyon's manners were too finished in their elegance to render it possible for her to treat the mother of her intended husband otherwise than with perfect respect and courtesy. Had the Handbook of Etiquette included a chapter devoted to the proprieties of demeanour on the part of a daughter-in-law elect, doubtless it would have been found that Miss Guyon's behaviour was in precise conformity with its rules. The elder lady did not feel exactly happy or at ease in the society of the younger, but that was her fault, not Miss Guyon's ; she did not understand fashionable people, that was all. It would be hard to part

with Robert ; but was she, his mother, to murmur at, to put any consideration in the world in comparison with, his good and happiness ? Surely not. To have been capable of doing such a thing would have been a treason to the whole ordering of her dutiful, pious, conscience-guided life. She was very much pleased, and perhaps a little proud, with that beautiful vicarious pride of mothers, to think of her son in the dignified position of a country gentleman, owning a fine estate, and holding his head high among men. She should be glad to see his beautiful and luxurious home ; but the comfortable Brixton villa satisfied all her individual wishes. She would not be present at her son's wedding, she would be out of her place among the other guests there ; but he should go forth that day with his mother's fervent blessing, and his marriage should be hallowed by her prayers.

The state of mind of the Reverend Decimus Dutton was not so calm, not so complacent. He disapproved of the connection. It was worldly ; it was, if any thing, " high : " the family circle of the Guyons included a bishop of ritualistic tendencies ;

on its outer edge to be sure, but he *was* a relative ; and "any thing of that kind," said Decimus to Ellen rather vaguely, "is so very shocking." Again, the diversion of large sums, presumably disposable for missionary purposes under happier, "more consistent circumstances" he called them, according to a phraseology in use among persons of his persuasion, and which is rather oracular than grammatical, into the mundane channels attendant on a "fashionable" marriage, was also "extremely sad." Decimus had come up to town hoping to induce Robert to share his own burning zeal for the mission to the Niger, and he found him engaged to a young lady who looked extremely unlikely to approve of the diversion of any of his wealth in a religio-philanthropical direction ; and who had calmly remarked, "Of course you would not suffer your sister to go to such a fatal climate," on hearing that the Reverend Decimus proposed to convey his bride to "Afric's burning plain."

The Rev. Decimus Dutton was a youngish man, with a face which would never look much older or much wiser than it looked at present. It was ra-

ther a handsome, and decidedly a good face; and it presented an absurd resemblance to that of Ellen Streightley, though there was not the slightest relationship between the amiable enthusiast and his betrothed bride, who believed him in all simple sincerity to be the noblest, best, handsomest of mankind. Perhaps there was a little veneration, due to habit, which is very powerful over such minds as Ellen Streightley's, in favour of Robert; but Decimus was decidedly more pious, there could be no doubt of *that*. A more prejudiced, a narrower-minded, or a better-meaning man than Decimus Dutton probably did not exist; and so admirably matched were he and Ellen Streightley, that those who saw their perfect adaptation to each other were apt to be tempted into using the gentle missionary's cant phrase, and talking of their proposed union as "providential."

"O, Decimus dear," began Ellen, as she and Hester entered the room—Miss Streightley was apt to emphasise her speech with interjections,—
"Hester is *so* pleased with my dress. Not that *you* care about that; still one may as well be de-

cent. Hester must go home now ; so just ring and send for a cab."

Then followed adieux, and Miss Gould departed. Her face was dark and angry as she drove away ; but it cleared after a little, and her thoughts shaped themselves into these words :

" After all, no one can rule destiny ; and supposing I had loved him, I must have borne it all the same."

Hester Gould witnessed the marriage of Robert Streightley and Katharine Guyon ; not in the capacity of a guest indeed, but in that of a spectator. It was characteristic of Hester that, though she had determined to be present, she made her attendance at the church appear to be the result of Ellen Streightley's importunities. That young lady threw looks of confidence and affection, and blew kisses off her finger-tips at her friend at furtive intervals during the ceremony, after the fashion of the Peckham boarding-school, somewhat to the discomposure of the devoted Decimus, who maintained a plaintive and under-protest air throughout. Hester Gould acknowledged, with ready acquiescence, the

exceeding grace and beauty of the bride, as she advanced with an assured and steady step, leaning on her father's arm, and took her place before the altar-rails, where the Bishop with ritualistic tendencies, stood ready to consecrate that awful promise so familiar to us all, and also to realise the utmost fears of Decimus, for his lordship read every word of the service, and wore the fullest of canonicals. Hester bent an eager gaze upon Katharine Guyon; but, under all its wrath and bitterness, there was the candour, there was the justice which never failed this exceptional woman; and she acknowledged fully and freely to her own heart the exceeding beauty of her unconscious rival.

Katharine was paler than her wont; but her eyes shone with their accustomed light, and her tall figure drawn up to its full height and proudly motionless, was full of indescribable dignity and grace. The rich folds of her dress, of lustrous white satin, with its garniture of swansdown and its fastenings of diamonds, did not so much adorn as they received grace from her. And the noble outline of her features showed like that of an

antique statue under the filmy bridal veil, which softened but did not conceal them. When Hester looked from the bride to the bridegroom, she acknowledged, too, that no external incongruity was evident. Robert Streightley looked like a self-possessed gentleman; not very handsome, not strikingly elegant, but not too much inferior to the beautiful girl whom he led away, in a few minutes, his wedded wife. It was quickly done and over, and the crowd was pressing round the carriages, and peering into the aisle of the church. Mr. Guyon, the very picture of gaiety and juvenility, led out Lady Henmarsh, quite affected, and remarkably well-dressed; then came Charles Yeldham and the bridesmaids—the unappropriated bridesmaids, be it observed; Decimus had paired off with Ellen the moment the bride and bridegroom had reached the church-door. Then the general crowd drifted out; and in the porch Hester found herself face to face with Mr. Daniel Thacker, who testified great delight at the *rencontre*.

“You are here as a spectator, like myself, Miss Gould?” said Mr. Thacker.

"Yes," replied Hester, "I am very much interested in this marriage. Mr. Streightley is one of my oldest, and his sister is one of my dearest friends."

"Just so," said Mr. Thacker. "I don't know much of Streightley; but I know something of the bride, and more of her father. A capital match for her and him."

"Meaning Mr. Streightley?"

"Meaning Mr. Guyon, Miss Gould. I am going to Hampstead: could I prevail on you to visit my sisters to-day? My phaeton is at the door. Do let me have the honour, Miss Gould; a visit from you is such a pleasure to them."

"Thank you, no; not to-day. My time is not my own, you know, Mr. Thacker, and I have an appointment at one o'clock a good distance from here."

"I am so sorry, so disappointed. Perhaps later in the day; I can be at your service at any hour."

"No, thank you." Hester smiled slowly as she spoke. "I promised to give this evening to Miss

Streightley. She will have so much to tell ; and she will come home as soon as possible after the bride and bridegroom are gone."

" Ah, by the bye, where are they going to ?"

" Where ? To Paradise, of course ; but *en attendant*, I believe, to Switzerland."

And Hester Gould, who had for the first time in her life been wanting in caution, bade Mr. Thacker "good morning;" and that gentleman watched her as she walked away, and said under his breath :

" By Jove, she *did* play for Streightley, and Miss Guyon beat her !"

So those twain were one flesh, and departed according to prescribed routine for their bridal tour on the Continent. So far the contract had been carried out, the price paid, and the goods delivered into the carriage by Mr. Guyon, who converted a broad smile of triumph into a doleful look of farewell ; and who, as the happy pair drove away, turned back into the dining-room to expedite the departure of his guests, in order

that he and Lady Henmarsh might have a quiet talk together over the past and the future.

So far all had gone well, thought Robert Streightley, or rather endeavoured to think so, but felt a sad depression and sense of failure at his heart, as, leaning back in the railway-carriage whirling them to Folkestone, he stole occasional glances at his bride, who, paler but lovelier than ever, kept her eyes fixed on a book, the pages of which she never turned, and of which she read never a line. How much did she know, he wondered, of all that had taken place? Not all; he himself had resolutely shrunk from hearing any thing in detail about the transaction in which that man Frere and his proposal were involved; and she—he knew her well enough to know that if she had the smallest suspicion of foul play she would leave him then and there on her marriage-day. No! she knew nothing of that,—she never should know. But there was a something in the dead calm of her face, in the cold clear look of her eyes, in her set lips, and in the quiet tones of the voice in which she briefly replied to his

occasional questions after her welfare,—something that made Robert Streightley's heart give a guilty throb, and told him that the first phase of retribution had begun. She might live it down, it would probably pass away; under different circumstances, and surrounded by all the luxuries that money could purchase, the haunting memory of the past might soon be laid at rest; but there are few men, let us hope, who on their wedding-days have, as Robert Streightley had on his, to face the conviction that not merely the love but the tolerance of his wife had yet to be won by him, and that between them lay a mine, partly of his own preparation, any accidental spark blown on to which would shatter their happiness for ever.

And she? In a charming but perfectly natural position, her head bent so as to screen her face as much as possible from her husband, her eyes fixed on her book, she sat there, outwardly cold as a statue, inwardly raging with slighted love, hurt pride, horror of the past, and dread of the future. The occurrences of the last month,

so often revolved in her mind, were, as she sat in the railway-carriage, once more brought out of their storehouse, and passed in dreary review: Gordon's strange silence, his absenting himself from their house, his abrupt departure for the Continent, her father's confession of his embarrassments, his proposition for getting rid of them, her friendlessness and despair, the few words spoken to her in the deepening gloom by Robert Streightley, and her reply, which decided all and settled her future—her future! ah, good God! Even the outward semblance of calm was gone as the thought rushed across her; the hot tears welled into her eyes, she set her lips tighter than ever, and with great difficulty restrained a cry of mingled anger and despair.

There was her fate sitting opposite to her: with that man, with whom she had not one thought in common, for whom she had, if any feeling at all, rather a feeling of abhorrence—with him was the rest of her life to be passed. He had bought and paid for her—paid for her? No! a great deal of the purchase-money was yet to

come, was to be placed at her disposal; and she would take care that it was speedily spent.

It was some time, however, before she found an opportunity of spending any of the large sum of pocket-money placed at her disposal by her husband, so eagerly were all her wishes anticipated by him. Previous to their marriage he had made his future bride many valuable presents—of dressing-case, jewels, travelling-desk, and elegant costly feminine nick-nacks—all of which had been examined, appraised, and duly extolled by Mr. Guyon; and their bridal tour was almost as expensive as a royal progress. In Robert Streightley the *ober-kellner* at the Hôtel Disch in Cologne found an easy prey, and sold to him more wicker-covered bottles of the *eau* than he had ever previously palmed off upon any Englishman. All along the Rhine-border the fiery cross was sent by couriers, and conductors of steam-boats, and drivers of *eilwagens*; and the landlords of the hotels knew that one of those *tolle Engländer* who mind no expense was coming on, and forthwith prices were trebled, and cellars were ransacked

for the precious wines, the Steinberger Cabinet and the Johannisberg, which none but mad Englishmen ever pay for. No town which they stopped at—and they stopped at nearly all, for the small amount of romance in Katharine's nature was roused by the sight of the castles and crags, of which in her school-girl days she had so often read; and it was the nearest approach to pleasure which she could experience to push aside actual practical life and lie dreaming of the past—no town which they stopped at was so poor as not to furnish some trophy for Robert Streightley to lay at his bride's feet. Accompanied by the courier, who made cent per cent upon every transaction, he would go blundering through the narrow streets, looking through the windows at the wares displayed in them, rushing in here and there, and making wild and incongruous purchases, to the intense astonishment of the pipe-smoking burghers, all unaccustomed to such energy. Robert Streightley's greatest pleasure seemed to lie in purchasing presents for his wife; and when they reached Frankfort he was never

out of the jewellers' shops on the Zeil, and his courier's whole day was taken up in running to and fro with little packets of hirschhorn and coral trinkets.

It was at Frankfort, a month after their marriage, that they received their first news from home. Streightley had wished to pass his honeymoon untroubled by thoughts of business, and Katharine had been too indifferent to give any directions about her letters; but when Robert called on the British Consul, who was an old correspondent of their house, he found a packet waiting for him, and hurried back with it to Katharine. She was reading a Tauchnitz edition of a novel, and looked languid and *distracte*.

"Here are letters from home, dearest," said Robert, rushing in with his usual energy; "two of them for you."

She thanked him as he handed them to her, and took them without other remark. One was from her father, full of parental gushing and expressive of intense anxiety to see her again; the other was from Lady Henmarsh, and was filled

with the gossip and tattle of the watering-places at which she and Sir Timothy were staying. She read them through, placed them on the table beside her, and was reverting to her novel, when her husband, still busily engaged in reading his correspondence, said,

“You don’t ask me who my letters are from, Kate? I thought all women were curious in such matters.”

He tried to throw a tone of raillery into his voice, poor fellow! as he said this. It was not very successful; for no answering smile beamed on Katharine’s face, as she said,

“I thought they were business letters.”

“Business letters! no, dearest; you may be sure I should not bore you with those. Here’s one from your father; but he says he has written to you; and—yes, of course; and here’s one from Ellen, my sister, full of news. You would like to read it?” And he held it out to her.

“There seems a great deal of it,” said Katharine, looking blankly at the sheets crossed and re-crossed with Miss Streightley’s spidery writing.

"Yes, there is a good deal of it; and some, perhaps, that might not interest you. But there was one thing I wanted to tell you—O yes, here it is. You recollect Miss Gould—Hester Gould?"

"I have heard you mention her; I never saw her."

"Never saw her? never saw Hester Gould? Dear me! How can that have been, I wonder? Well, Ellen writes that Hester Gould's uncle is dead, and has left her all his fortune. Hester is an heiress now; and though of course very quiet as yet, Ellen says she thinks Hester intends what Ellen calls 'making a splash.'"

The announcement had apparently no interest for Mrs. Robert Streightley; for she merely said, "Indeed!" and took up her book.

What had any interest for Mrs. Robt. Streightley? In good truth, nothing at all. Her pleasure in life seemed to have died out; and her cavaliers of the preceding season would scarcely have recognised the queen of the cotillon, or the beauty of the Row, in the cold passionless woman who would sit for hours looking straight before her

without speaking a word, and only by an occasional gleam in her eyes or a fleeting movement of the muscles of the mouth giving evidence of existence. Her pleasure in life had faded out; and she almost hoped that her life itself would fade out too, so hopelessly wearied of it did she feel. "Would to God that I were dead!" was her constant cry from the solitude of her chamber; and one night her wish was nearly fulfilled.

They had "done" all the usual Swiss places; and at Katharine's first and only request Robert had postponed their contemplated return home in order that his wife might have a glimpse of Italy. They selected the Simplon pass as the easiest, and left Chamounix in the early morning on mules, purposing to rest that night at Martigny. Katharine had been ailing for the last few days, but had said nothing to her husband. Ten hours' journey on a jolting mule, the terrors of the Tête Noire pass, despised by mountaineers, but sufficiently horrific to young ladies out of health, and the absence of food—for it was impossible to eat the hard goat's-flesh or to drink the sour wine put

before them at the *auberge*—finished the little strength left to her ; and as her husband lifted her from the mule at the door of the hotel at Martigny she fainted in his arms. The kindly people of the inn were round her in a moment, carried her to their best room, and were unremitting in their attentions. Under restoratives Katharine recovered for a few minutes ; only to fall again into a fainting-fit so prolonged, so deep, so dismally like death itself, that Robert, horribly alarmed, bid them rush off and fetch the first doctor they could find.

The doctor came ; a tall thin man, with a light straw hat on his head and buff slippers on his feet ; a solemn man, who made a solemn bow, and took his place by the side of the patient solemnly. He touched poor Katharine's pulse ; he peered into her face, and he announced that mademoiselle—he begged pardon—madame, was not well, and that he would send her a *tisane*. He took up his straw hat, bowed solemnly, and went out.

Robert Streightley had stood by watching this performance with impatience ; but when the door

was closed behind the doctor, Katharine gave a long low moan, and said in answer to his fond inquiry, "O, I shall die!" He saw that no time was to be lost in doing something more effectual than what was proposed by M. le Docteur Grabow, and at once summoned the landlord.

"That doctor is an idiot. Is there no other in the place?"

"But no, monsieur. And the Doctor Grabow—"

"Is there no English doctor in the hotel?"

"But no, monsieur. You and the suffering lady are all of English whom I have now the honour to— Ah! let us not forget! There was an English doctor of medicine who left here yesterday morning—"

"Do you know where he has gone?"

"Certainly, monsieur,—to Geneva; did not I myself recommend him to the Hôtel de l'Ecu,—me?"

"Do you know his name?"

"I can show monsieur the name in the strangers' book. It is a name of English, which nobody but English can pronounce."

The book was brought; and five minutes after a telegram was despatched to Dr. Hudson, at the Hôtel de l'Ecu, Geneva, imploring him to come and see an English lady then lying dangerously ill at Martigny.

That night never faded out of Robert Streightley's memory. To his last hour he recollected the dead solemn calm, broken only by an occasional moan from the half-insensible figure on the bed, the position of the furniture, the subjects of the prints on the walls. As he kept his watch grim and solitary (for the doctor, after the failure of the *tisane* to produce immediate cure, gave up the case and refused to attend again); as he looked at Katharine, with her face whiter than her night-dress, with blanched lips, and hair flung in wild disorder over her pillow, his heart sunk within him and he shook with fear. Was this to be the end of it? Was that lovely prize, which he had accomplished with so much difficulty and at such a sacrifice of principle, to be taken from him now? Was he to lose her,—to lose her without ever having had the chance of

winning her love; of letting her see that he was something more than the mere rich City man, who had triumphed by the influence of his money; that he worshipped her with all his soul— Ah! she must be spared until she had learned that! And Robert Streightley fell on his knees by the bedside, and prayed to God to hear his petition.

The next day at noon Dr. Hudson arrived. Katharine was at her lowest ebb about this time, and Robert was nearly mad with anxiety; but he derived infinite comfort from the sight of the English doctor's honest cheery face and from the sound of his voice. A wondrous voice; so clear and yet so soft, ringing with comfort and encouragement and hope; a voice at the first sound of which Katharine opened her long-closed eyes and looked with interest at the speaker—would have spoken herself, but that Dr. Hudson raised his finger with a cautioning gesture, and then laid it on his lip. He did not permit her to speak until he had felt her pulse and heard the account of her seizure from her husband; and

then he only asked her a few questions which needed very short replies. And then Dr. Hudson took Robert Streightley into the next room, and said :

“ She may recover—I think she will ; but the next four-and-twenty hours will decide.”

“ You—you will not leave her, doctor ! Any sum which—”

“ My dear sir,” interrupted Dr. Hudson, laying his hand on Streightley’s arm, “ I will not leave her bedside until the crisis is over.”

And he did not. Independently of the attraction of the case itself (and Dr. Hudson loved his profession, and pursued it with an ever-increasing fondness for its study), he found himself very much interested in the beauty of his patient, and profoundly touched by the adoration of her so quietly, so unceasingly shown by her husband. It was a little new to him this worship of a woman by the man who was legally bound to her ; for Dr. Hudson lived habitually in Paris, and had a high repute amongst the French aristocracy, amongst whom there was

indeed a great deal of the tender passion, though it generally flowed in the wrong channels. He was pleased too with Streightley's sound sense and straightforward honesty; and after the crisis had passed, and Katharine was in the earliest stage of convalescence, she would hear the doctor and her husband discussing politics, and commerce, statistics, and science, far into the night. The doctor was a widower, had no domestic ties, all his patients were away from Paris; and he was so pleased with his new friends that he extended the period of his holiday, and remained with them as their guest.

So a fortnight passed, at the end of which Katharine was pronounced in a fit state to journey homeward; and they started, travelling by easy stages to Paris, where they remained three days. At the "Nord" railway-station, just before their train left for Paris, Dr. Hudson bade them farewell.

"Remember!" said he, holding Katharine's hand, "I've seen you in an important crisis of your life, and I want to be associated with it!

I'm an odd old fellow, with no one to care for or to be cared for by, and I've taken a fancy to you and your husband. If ever you're very ill, or in any state in which you think I can be of service to you, you'll promise to let me know?"

Robert was settling the wraps in the carriage; but Katharine pressed the doctor's hand, and said, "I promise you."

The next moment the whistle sounded, and the train moved on.

When and where was that promise kept?

CHAPTER II.

AT MIDDLEMEADS.

CULTIVATED taste and the tender sentiment which finds delightful occupation in preparing a house for a beloved object had not been called into operation in the arrangement and decoration of the abode to which Robert Streightley brought his bride in the early spring which succeeded their marriage. These motive powers had, however, been efficiently replaced by the care and experience of a first-rate London upholsterer; and a more refined and *exigeant* taste than that of the young mistress of Middlemeads might have pronounced a favourable judgment upon the result. There was, indeed, nothing ancient about the mansion but the mansion itself. Its family associations were all with those from whose keeping it had passed, and by the change had lost the

subtle touch of dignity which lingers about a residence within whose walls many lines of the same race have begun and ended. It had none of those grand though dingy *pièces de famille* which lent an air of refinement and meaning to the faded house in Queen Anne Street; but it was a home which any man might be proud to inaugurate—a home to which all these things might be suitably added in time. Seen as Katharine Streightley saw it first, with the tender glory of the spring upon the woods, with the sunshine pouring down upon the grand old façade, and the joyous music of innumerable birds piercing the pure air, her new home elicited an exclamation of delighted surprise from her, which was eagerly welcomed by Robert. He had seen but rarely of late any evidence of the enthusiasm and freshness of heart which had been among the first and most potent of Katharine's charms for him. He had looked for them in vain when new scenes and new impressions might have been expected to call them forth during their travels; but they had rewarded his search so rarely, that he had begun to wonder

if he was ever again to see that peculiar smile, like sudden sunshine, in the eyes whose beauty had grown sombre of late, or to recognise that keen trill of girlish pleasure in the voice whose refined intonation had acquired depth and seriousness since he had heard it first. Robert Streightley knew very little of the woman he had married, as little of her strength as of her weakness; and the passionate ardour of his love for her, the undiminished admiration with which he regarded her, were accompanied with all the interest and curiosity attendant upon a new study. His narrow experience of life, his little knowledge of women, preserved him from much pain in the present at least. It never occurred to him to impute the alteration in Katharine to its true source. He had taken Mr. Guyon's word for the trifling nature of the sentiment entertained by his daughter for Gordon Frere, though even at that period it is probable he would have hesitated at taking Mr. Guyon's word upon any other subject; and though he could not deceive himself so far as to believe that his beautiful wife reciprocated the feelings

with which he regarded her, he never ceased to hope that in time she would come to love him. At least he would deserve her love, if unlimited indulgence, if ceaseless observance, if the gratification of every wish, every fantasy could merit it. At least he would atone— And when Robert's meditations reached that point they were apt to become very uncomfortable, and he would fall back upon the recollection of his wealth, and of all that he intended to do with it solely for Katharine's benefit and pleasure, and he would say in his heart, "At all events, Frere could have given her nothing that she values; for she likes luxury and pleasure—she is quite a woman of the world." In saying which he, the poor fellow, believed he passed an eulogium upon her; for that "world," seen through the medium of his passion, had quite bewildered his fancy and obscured his judgment.

It was, therefore, with intense pleasure that Robert observed the glow of satisfaction, the eager alacrity with which Katharine inspected the house and grounds; that he noted the bright eyes and glowing smiles with which she praised all the

arrangements made for her comfort, and approved of the scale and order of the household. The irrepressible girlishness of her age aided her in these circumstances. It was quite impossible not to feel pride and delight in such possessions; and she felt them to the full. Ignorant as she had been of the real state of her father's affairs, and guiltless of the false pretences of their life in London, she had always had a vague sense of insecurity; she had always been annoyed by a dearth of ready-money; she had constantly found herself wishing papa would give her a cheque when she went out shopping, and would not oblige her to remain so long and so deeply in her milliner's debt; and now she felt the contrast in the sense of an unexplained but intense relief. The perfect order, the luxury, the quiet of her house, the beauty of the gardens and the woods, the deference, the observance with which she was treated—differing widely from the capricious caresses of her father, under which her keen intelligence detected the unscrupulousness, selfishness, and the contempt for her sex from which her pride and her delicacy revolted—

the novel sense of the importance of her position,—all these united to rouse Katharine from the coldness and bitterness of feeling which had succeeded the awakening from her love-trance. She thought in after-days that during the time which immediately succeeded her arrival at Middlemeads she had not been far from loving her husband. Certain it is that she thought less of her false lover, that she nourished her anger against him less sedulously, that she fed less upon the poisonous fruit of pride, rage, and mortification. She took pleasure in the beauty and luxury which surrounded her : she owed it all to Robert ; she could hardly look upon and enjoy it without feeling some gratitude to the giver, without some softening of the pride of her resentful heart, without some more tender and womanly sentiment than that she had purchased all this at the price of herself, and it was but her right. The love which she could not deny, which she was forced to acknowledge, to wonder at every day since she had been Robert's wife, had at first inspired her only with contemptuous wonder ; she treated it with disdain in her

thoughts, as another proof of the reckless selfishness of men. Here was one ready and willing to pay any price for the gratification of a fancy. So much the better ! He had his reward ; and her father's needs were supplied, and her defeat and mortification covered by the same means. But was she bound to feel any affection or gratitude to this man in consequence ? He loved her for his own sake, not for hers ; it was a selfish passion, and he was rich enough to buy its object ; that was all. It suited her to be sold ; and there was the whole transaction. Love and gratitude had no part in it, could never have any part in any thing in which she should be concerned any more. Gordon Frere was a poor man, she believed : well, she could have been grateful to him if he had shared his narrow means with her, and incurred the anger of his family for her sake ; she could have been very happy and very good. But what was the use of thinking of these things ? He had only amused himself with her. Was she to be grateful to this man, who had merely purchased her, as he might have purchased any other expensive object which

it pleased him to possess. They would get on very well together, no doubt. She had no fear of any disagreements; she trusted, with reason, in her own high breeding and her entire indifference; and then rich people never need quarrel and be disagreeable to each other, the restrictions of life were not for them; finally, it did not much matter, after all. Katharine believed that she had discovered life to be a swindle, and that she should never more be deceived. This was already a sufficiently lamentable effect of the disappointment she had sustained. With such a character, what might not result from a discovery of the whole truth—from a discovery that the man she loved had never been false to her, and that the marriage into which she had entered in self-defence was the basest of transactions!

For the present no such discovery was within the reach of calculation or apprehension, and Robert revelled in the new-born graciousness of Katharine's manner and in the revival of her girlish brightness. A little sense of duty now; a little of that training in principle, that discipline

in well-doing, which only a mother's care, or that of a woman fitted to replace a mother, can bestow; and a life of happiness and usefulness might have begun for Katharine. But all such influences were wanting; and the instincts for good which made themselves heard occasionally in her tempestuous soul were but impulses—they had no root in themselves, and they withered away. The future process by which they were to be planted, and watered, and given increase, would be full of pain no doubt, as every such process of cultivation of the human soul must be; in those early days at Middlemeads it had not begun. The joyous, gracious manner which shed sunshine into her husband's heart was but the ebullition of Katharine's girlish pleasure, and the natural demonstration of a perfectly well-bred woman, to whom it was pleasant to be gracefully grateful, and to whom polished prettiness of speech was "free as bird on branch." It sufficed to create an Elysium for Robert, who found it easy to accommodate himself to the change in all his habits and in his manner of living, and to whom each day brought a renewed opportunity

of ministering to his wife's tastes and pleasures.

Among the earliest of their visitors was Ellen Streightley, who had received a polite invitation from Katharine, a few days after her arrival in England. This invitation had included Mrs. Streightley; but there had been no serious wish on the part of Katharine that it should be accepted, and a satisfactory conviction that there was no danger of such an event. Any thing like *rapprochement* between his mother and his wife was beyond Robert's expectation, almost beyond his desire. They belonged to two distinct worlds of thought, feeling, habits, and ideas; and though he comprehended the fact rather by instinct than by perception, he did comprehend it too fully to be led into any danger of making an effort to bring them together, which must be unsuccessful, and might be disastrous. Mrs. Streightley's naturally quiet temper had made her accept Robert's marriage with tranquil acquiescence. Her son would be less widely parted from her than most sons from their mothers, under such circumstances; they

would still have many subjects of common interest, and she must be content with that. She had never seriously expected that Robert would make a selection from their narrow circle; she had not expected that he would be attracted by the Miss Pratts and the Miss Perkinses of the Brixton connection, who exchanged patterns for Berlin-wool work and manuscript music with Ellen, who wore Oxford-Street bonnets, and took notes of Sunday's sermon and Wednesday evening's lecture. She had been content so long as Robert made no choice at all, but devoted himself exclusively to his business; and now that he had chosen a beautiful, fashionable young lady, whose habits, whose pursuits, whose very speech was all but unintelligible to her, she would be content still. Her religious principles were largely assisted by her natural temperament; and their combined action made her the most inoffensive, the most distant, and the most silent of mothers-in-law.

"But you have never seen my fine country-house, mother; you will surely come and see it," Robert remonstrated, when his mother

requested him to bear her excuses to Katharine.

"I shall see it in time, my dear," she answered, "never fear; but you must let me have my own way; you know I have always had it;" and she smiled gently, with the touching smile of the old looking back upon the past. "Your wife must have many friends whom she wishes to see. I could neither bear to find myself among fine people, to whom I am totally unaccustomed, nor to feel that I was excluding her friends. You will be constantly in town, Robert, and you will come and see me very often." And then she began to speak of his health, to inquire into the details of Katharine's illness at Martigny; and Robert saw that the matter must remain as it was for the present. It was, however, decided that Ellen should accept Katharine's invitation; and accordingly she made her appearance at Middlemeads within a fortnight of Katharine's installation in her new house. It would have needed a less kindly nature than Katharine's—in which, perverted as it was, true womanly feeling had its

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place—to resist the frank and innocent gaiety of Ellen, the *naïf* pleasure which she showed in the inspection of the house, her admiration of the luxurious furniture, and her surprise at finding herself in a scene of such unaccustomed splendour, and yet, after a fashion, at home there. All this was her brother's—all this was Robert's, who had been so well content with the modest comfort of the Brixton villa; and the beautiful young woman who had inspired him with tastes thus gratified, and admitted him into a circle of society of which Ellen had never before had even a glimpse, was her own sister-in-law. She had a kind of prescriptive right to be intimate with her; she wondered whether she might venture to call her “Katharine.” Not on the first day of her visit certainly; for though Katharine was perfectly polite, there was no approach to familiarity in her manner; and she inquired, at luncheon, whether “Miss Streightley” would drive, in a tone which seemed to render any such sisterly appellations as “Ellen” and “Katharine” hopeless. But this did not last: they were, after all, two young girls;

and the very superiority of intellect and of breeding, of which Katharine was conscious, made her readier to thaw towards Ellen, whose admiration of her brother's beautiful wife was as sincere and single-hearted as it was warm and humble. The warnings of the Rev. Decimus lost their power over the girl's imagination; she yielded to the charm which Katharine exercised over all whom she chose to attract, and was almost as much dazzled as her brother. To Robert the good understanding which subsisted between the two was a source of the purest pleasure; he loved his sister dearly, and he had a sense of her piety, her gentleness, her humility of mind, and the beneficence of such an influence, though he had never defined these things to his own mind or reasoned upon them. On the whole, these early days at Middlemeads were good days; they were a fair seed-time, and the harvest might have been blessed; but the enemy had sown the tares early, and they were destined to flourish in sinister strength.

As for Katharine, the genuine affection and admiration with which her sister-in-law regarded

her soon began to be sweet and precious to her ; her former life had been isolated from all such ties of girlish friendship and confidence, and she had despised them in theory, holding them among the missish follies which she laughed at and held herself above. She had aspired to the reputation of a woman of the world, and she had attained it ; and in right of it had no intimacies except of convenience, and no relations with her own sex except those of the most superficial social observance. To Katharine, therefore—who had not, since she left the elegant establishment in which she had acquired all the graces with which nature had not previously supplied her, had any more congenial companion for the hours not absolutely demanded by society than Lady Henmarsh—the novelty of such a friendship as that offered her by Ellen Streightley possessed an ineffable charm. The purity, the simplicity, the very narrowness of the girl's mind pleased her ; the unquestioning submission with which she received her opinions, the unqualified admiration which she evinced in every look and word, conveyed, by their simple

sincerity, the subtlest charm of flattery. Katharine felt that Ellen's presence did her good ; that the peace of mind which pervaded her diffused a tranquil and wholesome atmosphere around her : she did not know whence came the salutary influence ; she had never been taught to recognise piety and principle by their peaceable fruits ; but she felt all that she did not analyse ; and above all she became conscious that she was beginning to live less for herself—that she was acquiring new, unselfish, and harmless interests. Her heart had begun to soften in those days ; she was won by the artless confidence of the girl to whom she was an object of wondering admiration, and the wrath and bitterness of her soul began to subside.

The last thing in the world to occur to such a mind as that of Ellen Streightley would have been such a possibility as a marriage without perfect affection and confidence. She had never met with an instance of any thing so dreadful and unnatural out of a novel ; and the Rev. Decimus disapproved of novels, so that she had discontinued their perusal, and had even had the hardihood to endeavour to

induce Katharine to do likewise, and to substitute the interesting details of the *Missionary Record*, over which she was accustomed to shiver and cry a good deal. Thus, Ellen never doubted for a moment that Katharine's had been, in the language of young ladies, "a love-match;" and the matter-of-course way in which she took this for granted, founded all her talk to Katharine upon it, and treated her brother and his wife as absolutely one in undivided interest and unreserved confidence, though, no doubt, a conclusive evidence of Ellen's own dullness of perception, had all the good effect which an opposite quality, and the exercise of the most perfect tact, could have produced. It was impossible to resist the influence of this frank and perfect belief in the mutual good faith of their relation; it was impossible to resist the gay and happy simplicity which persisted in believing in its ideal; and, but for the sore spot in Katharine's heart, so obstinately hidden, and the sorer spot in Robert's conscience, which ever and anon pained him horribly and vainly, the angel of peace might have found an abiding resting-place

with them then. The soft rustle of his wings was often audible to both in those early days ; to which they were destined to look back in the future with vain yearning and regret.

“Were you not surprised, Robert, to hear of Hester’s good fortune?” said Ellen Streightley to her brother one morning, as the little party were engaged in the pleasing occupation of reading their letters, of which an unusually large number had been laid upon the breakfast-table.

“Yes,” said Robert, raising his eyes from a letter which he had been reading with a moody and troubled expression. “Yes, I was indeed, and very much pleased. She was an admirable example of industry and courage. I never could bear to think of a woman having to work ; that is a man’s part in life. Is your letter from Hester?” he asked, in a tone of interest.

“O yes,” said Ellen ; “Hester is just the same to me as ever, though Matilda Perkins said she wouldn’t be, and I must be very silly to imagine a rich heiress would care about me. I can’t think

how people can be so mean; can you, Robert? Only fancy any one imagining that money can influence people in that way! I am ashamed to say she made me feel almost afraid of Hester; and I cannot tell you how relieved I was when I found her just the same. I was very near confessing to her that I had wronged her in my thoughts; but then I knew they were not my thoughts, but Matilda Perkins's; and I had no business to tell her sins, you know; and after all, perhaps she was not so much to blame,—she did not know Hester as well as I do."

Katharine, who had laid aside her letters, and was now busily crumbling bread into a saucer half-full of cream—an operation which her beautiful little Maltese dog, Topaze, watched with placid but appreciative interest—smiled at the ingenious eagerness with which Ellen sought to exculpate one friend and to exalt another. Robert's attention strayed from his sister; his eyes were following the movements of his wife's slender fingers. She placed the saucer on the ground and called her dog.

"Here, Topaze, come and eat your breakfast!

—And now, Ellen, tell me all about this wonderful Miss Gould. She is tremendously rich, isn't she, and very handsome, blue, and *bel esprit*, and all the rest of it?"

Ellen looked rather puzzled as she said, "Hester is very rich, certainly; but I am not sure about her being very handsome; she always seemed so to me, of course—but then I knew her so well."

"And every one is handsome whom you know well?" said Katharine laughing. "What a beauty your brother must be, and Mr. Dutton, and I—after a while, when you know me long enough!"

"You know quite well that you are a beauty now and always, to me and to every one," said Ellen with beaming eyes; "and it is wicked of you to laugh at me because I cannot exactly express what I mean. Hester is not beautiful like you, so that every one must acknowledge and no one can deny her beauty; but I love her face. And she is very clever, wonderfully clever. Robert, have you never told Katharine about Hester? She used to be quite one of ourselves, you know."

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She knows all about you, Katharine, and takes the greatest interest in you."

"Does she?" said Katharine with rather a vacant smile.

"O yes; and—Katharine," said Ellen timidly, "I should so like her to know you, I should so like my two best friends to be acquainted—and—and she is so accustomed to be with me and Robert—and I have told her so much about Middlemeads, that—if you don't think I take a liberty in asking you—"

"You would wish me to invite Miss Gould here, you mean, my dear Ellen?" said Katharine with her most graceful air; "and you stammer about it as if I were a tigress, and you were afraid to ask so trifling a favour in your brother's house. You are a dear silly little goose,—go pluck one of your own quills, and send off your invitation to your friend immediately. Ask her for Tuesday—Lady Henmarsh comes to-morrow, and we must have her and Sir Timothy *casés* before any one else arrives."

Katharine rose as she spoke, and Ellen did the

same, turning with sparkling eyes to her brother.

"O, Robert, do you hear what Katharine says?" she exclaimed. "She desires me to invite Hester to Middlemeads; and I hardly dare tell you how I longed for her to come here. Is she not kind?"

"Yes, indeed," said Robert; but he spoke rather absently. "She is—I am sure we shall be delighted to see Hester here."

"Come, Ellen," said Katharine; "I am going to look after my hyacinths: leave your brother to his letters, and come with me."

A minute later the two girls passed by the window of the room in which Robert sat, still engaged in what was apparently no pleasant task. He looked up as their voices caught his ear, drew near to the window, and followed the graceful figures with thoughtful, regretful eyes, until they disappeared. Then he sighed deeply, and gathering up his papers left the room.

Half an hour later Robert sought his wife and sister in the garden, and found them in deep con-

versation with the gardener, a Scotchman of unparalleled skill and obstinacy.

"I beg your pardon, Katharine," he said, "but I overlooked this letter this morning. It is from your father, enclosed to me, from Paris. It must have fallen out when I opened his."

"Thank you," said Katharine carelessly, as she took the note from his hand and stuck it into her belt; then resumed her conversation with the gardener. Ellen felt rather surprised that Katharine could possibly defer the reading of a letter from her father, and recurred to the matter again as she sat down to her desk to enjoy the delight of sending off the longed-for invitation to Hester Gould. She had seen Mr. Guyon at his daughter's wedding, but only on that occasion, and she had not been particularly attracted by him.

"Could it be possible that he was not kind to Katharine, and that she is not very fond of him?" thought the guileless Ellen, to whom any perversion of the relations and duties of life was almost inconceivable and incredible. She shook her simple head gravely at the suspicion, and then proceeded

to write a gushing letter to Miss Gould, in answer to that which she had received, and in which, had she indulged a second person with its perusal, that individual would have discerned a very distinct intimation that the writer expected and exacted from Ellen that she should obtain precisely such an invitation as Katharine had so readily and gracefully suggested.

CHAPTER III.

HARDENING.

“MY dear Kate, what a perfect paradise of a place you have here!” said Lady Henmarsh to her young hostess, when, having made a tour of inspection of the house, the two ladies found themselves alone in Katharine’s morning-room. “I had no notion Mr. Streightley meant to *ménager grand train* after this fashion. You are a fortunate girl, Kate, and I hope you understand and appreciate your luck.”

Lady Henmarsh spoke with the accent of strong conviction, and looked around her approvingly as she did so. She and Sir Timothy had arrived by a mid-day train from London: the first hours after their arrival had been passed in the manner usual on similar occasions,—in seeing the house, dawdling about the gardens, and in-

specting the hothouses ; and now the moment had arrived which Katharine and her guest had each felt disposed to defer as long as possible—that of a *tête-à-tête*, in which the discussion of the past and present must necessarily have its place.

Katharine was standing by a window which opened like a door upon a small perfectly-kept flower-garden, and looking musingly out upon the fair expanse of park and woodland which stretched away into the distance. Lady Henmarsh was looking at her with more curious scrutiny than she had ventured to indulge in in the presence of others ; and the result of her examination was, that Katharine was more beautiful than ever. The assured demeanour, the perfect gracefulness, the lofty ease of manner, which had been perhaps a little too pronounced in the girl, were perfectly in their place as attributes of the young matron, who did the honours of her splendid house with faultless elegance and *aplomb*. The taste and richness of her dress, the judicious assortment of her ornaments, the air of dignity and calm which dwelt about her, made

her indeed a being to be regarded with almost wondering admiration. And Lady Henmarsh admired and wondered—wondered how she liked it all; wondered how she and Robert got on together; whether he was afraid of Katharine (she put the question to herself in just such plain words),—thought it very likely, all things considered; wondered whether Katharine ever heard of Gordon Frere, and what she thought of him if she did; and finally wondered whether she might venture to question her on these points: but while the thought passed through her mind the answer passed through it also, and Lady Henmarsh knew perfectly well that she would never dare to mention Frere's name to Mrs. Streightley.

"This room is perfectly exquisite," Lady Henmarsh began again; "and I suppose you keep it strictly to yourself; that you give audience here, queen of Middlemeads, when it suits you; but shut out the profane vulgar,—eh, Kate?"

"Yes," answered Katharine carelessly; "it

is a pretty room, and I use it a great deal,—that is to say, Ellen and I.”

“Ellen and you!” repeated Lady Henmarsh with profound astonishment. “You don’t mean to tell me, Katharine, that you have really taken to be intimate with that uninteresting creature—that sheep-like young lady, the veriest type of the most detestable class of society girls that I have ever encountered! A silly, pious, under-bred girl, engaged to a vulgar missionary preacher! Really you amaze me, Kate. Perhaps,” she said, with a covert glance at Katharine, and a strong effort to be perfectly familiar and natural, dictated by an instinctive feeling that she had lost ground with one whom she had formerly influenced—“perhaps you are doing the model wife, acting on the ‘love-me-love-my-dog’ principle, and cultivating this very modest flower for her brother’s sake. If so, I admire you for it, Katharine. I am glad to see you have a due sense of the value of ‘thorough’ in you; there is no more precious quality; but I confess I did not expect it.”

Katharine had fixed her large bright eyes upon Lady Henmarsh at the beginning of this speech with an expression of cold surprise, which succeeded in making the speaker feel very uncomfortable before she reached the end of it. A few moments elapsed before Katharine answered gravely :

“Miss Streightley is a person whom I like and *esteem*. I fear I shall never imitate her good qualities ; but I am glad to know that I have at least the grace to admire them. Of course, as Mr. Streightley’s sister, I should have shown her every attention ; but such a duty soon became a pleasure.”

Katharine spoke in a cold and dignified tone, which produced an exceedingly unpleasant effect upon Lady Henmarsh, whose face assumed a certain comical expression, suggestive of an instantly-repressed inclination to whistle. Her feeling towards Katharine had always hovered on the borders of dislike ; but from the present moment it crossed them, and she never tried to deceive herself more about its nature. She had

been a party to the wound inflicted upon the pride of this haughty woman; she had witnessed her suffering, had spoken to her of her humiliation, had had cognisance of the "transaction" of this marriage; and Katharine would never forgive her. In her she would find a polished, hospitable, and attentive hostess, observant of every social duty, and resolute against every attempt on her part to reëstablish an intimacy which had never been more than superficial and of convenience. Lady Henmarsh perceived the state of the case clearly; but as she had no feelings to be hurt in the matter, she took very kindly to a hearty dislike of Katharine.

"It is a comfort to know that Ned has got what he wanted, at all events," she thought, as she looked at the moody frown which had come over Katharine's countenance as she spoke the last sentences; "and if she's fool enough to *filer le parfait amour* with this City lout and all his kin, or hypocrite enough to pretend to do so, so much the better,—things will be easier for Ned, and that's the main point."

But Lady Henmarsh said aloud, and with the most perfect suavity,

“My dear Katharine, you are surely not so silly as to suppose I blame you for any attention to Mr. Streightley’s sister. I daresay I shall like her very much when I know her better; and I’m sure it’s quite charming to find you getting on so admirably with your people-in-law. And now, I think, having seen as much of your beautiful house as I can manage for to-day, I will disappear until dinner-time. I must look after Sir Timothy. Thank you, dear; I know my way to my rooms. How delightfully you have chosen for me, Kate! just the situation and aspect I like best. Sir Timothy is perfectly charmed.”

Lady Henmarsh, safely secluded within her own apartment, proceeded to indite a piquant epistle to her “cousin Ned,” in which she painted the Streightley *ménage* in colours highly agreeable to that gentleman’s feelings, and indulged herself with some of the ridicule of Ellen and her brother, whose flow had been so peremptorily arrested by Katharine. She knew that it would be rather

agreeable than otherwise to Mr. Guyon to be told, on the authority of an eye-witness, that his daughter was perfectly happy; so she gave him that pleasant assurance, inquired affectionately when he proposed coming to witness the felicity of Middlemeads in person, and hinted that his presence would add considerably to the attractions of that sojourn in her own estimation.

Robert's reception of Sir Timothy and Lady Henmarsh had been all that the most exacting guests could desire. The poor fellow felt unbounded gratitude towards Lady Henmarsh, who had, as he said to himself, "always been his friend,"—gratitude which it was a pleasure and a relief to him to feel,—gratitude which he could not extend to Mr. Guyon,—no; he was an accomplice, not a friend; and the tie between them was, one of pain, which made itself felt, and of shame, to which no effort, no triumph, could render him insensible. He was totally ignorant of Lady Henmarsh's complicity in Mr. Guyon's manoeuvres; he knew only that he had received the warmest welcome from her when his pretensions were an-

nounced; that she had appeared to regard his marriage as all that it should be; and even now that the prize was won, the treasure he had paid so high a price for all his own, he attached an unreasonable importance to Lady Henmarsh's presence, to her approbation. He did not say so in plain terms to himself; but he felt that she would support his cause with Katharine, that she would lend him additional importance. In the timidity of his sore conscience, he felt that it was a great thing to be strengthened by the presence of a person unconscious and unsuspecting of the means by which his success had been effected, and who had welcomed it on its own merits. So little did he understand his wife's proud isolation of heart, that he mistook her courtesy to her guest for respect for her opinion, and looked to Lady Henmarsh's aid in gaining Katharine's heart as ardently as he had hailed her support in his suit for her hand.

The truth was just the opposite of that which Robert believed it to be. From the moment Lady Henmarsh arrived at Middlemeads, Katharine's

mood underwent a change unfavourable to the prospect of domestic happiness which had begun to dawn upon her. An atmosphere of heartlessness and worldliness surrounded this woman ; and then she was associated in Katharine's mind with all the bitterness and humiliation of the past. The pain, now grown almost old, began to revive again ; the restlessness and weariness of spirit, the terrible anger, the unavailing self-contempt, which rendered Katharine unapproachable to all, despite her suave and gracious manner, and especially to him who had afforded her the occasion to incur it. These feelings did not return in their intensity all at once ; but their first approach to the invasion of Katharine's heart was made when the girl perceived the hardly veiled contempt with which her *ci-devant* chaperone regarded her spontaneous effort to be good and happy. It needed little to turn the balance in which the fate of Robert and Katharine Streightley hung at that moment, and Lady Henmarsh's disdainful touch did it. Not directly—she had no direct influence with Katharine now—but indirectly, by the pain of humiliating association,

by the sudden revival of the old bitterness, and the sense that all this was but a sordid bargain after all. The evil leaven began its work when Lady Henmarsh left Katharine, still standing by the window of her morning room, in the self-same attitude in which she had stood by the window in Queen Anne Street, and watched in vain for the coming of Gordon Frere. She moved away at length, with a restless and impatient sigh, and went to seek for Ellen.

Ellen Streightley had been rather frightened by Lady Henmarsh, whose rapid talk on a variety of subjects removed from Ellen's comprehension and experience had oppressed her considerably. She had accordingly kept out of the way, since she had contrived to make her escape during the tour of inspection; and Katharine ultimately discovered her in a quiet corner of the library, deeply engaged in the manufacture of an unspeakably hideous pair of embroidered slippers. She laid aside her work at Katharine's approach, and they proceeded to discuss the time and manner of Miss Gould's expected arrival on the ensuing day,

Ellen losing herself in conjectures as to what Katharine would think of Hester, and what Hester would think of Katharine. She had most of the discourse to herself, and also enjoyed a secret satisfaction in the reflection that to-morrow she would have *her* friend—a more important person than Lady Henmarsh—too, to make a fuss about. She wondered how Robert could like that woman so much, and be so deferential to her; she might be very grand and all that, but she had a way of making people feel small and uncomfortable, which was not like a real lady—not like dear Katharine, for instance; however, there was one comfort, she could not put down Hester.

“Is Miss Gould likely to marry, Ellen?” asked Katharine in the course of their conversation. “It would be a terrible take-in for the fortune-hunters, you know, or rather you don’t know, if the prize of the season were found to be already won.”

Ellen looked at her sister-in-law with the half-solemn, half-stupid gaze habitual to her when she was puzzled. Katharine had never uttered any such *banale* sarcasm to her before; that she did so

now was the first symptom of the evil influence that was upon her.

"No," said Ellen slowly; "I do not think Hester ever cared for any one; she gave all her mind, she used to say, to her work. But O, Katharine, how nice it is to think that she can marry a man as poor as Decimus now, if she likes!—that is the only thing that makes it worth while to be an heiress, is it not?"

"I am not sure of that, Ellen," said Katharine; "it is a great recommendation certainly, but heiress-ship has some other advantages too. But there's the first bell; let us go and make ourselves beautiful for Sir Timothy."

"And for Robert, Katharine," said Ellen archly; "but you are always beautiful for *him*."

"Ay, she may marry a poor man if she likes," thought Robert's wife, as she sat before a long glass in her room, and looked at her beautiful face framed in the unbound masses of her glossy hair. "She may buy, instead of being bought—that's all the difference; the distinction is valuable, however."

* * * * *

Robert Streightley drove his sister to the station where he and Yeldham had hired a trap on the occasion of their visit to Middlemeads, to meet her friend on the day following Lady Henmarsh's arrival. The drive was a pleasant one, for Ellen talked of Katharine, with only occasional and brief interludes and digressions in favour of the absent missionary; and Robert was ready to extend his sympathy to his sister to a degree which would have seemed incredible to him a short time before. He was very happy that day; his face showed the gladness that was at his heart, as it reflected the smile with which Katharine had nodded a farewell to him and Ellen, as the open carriage passed the window where she was standing with her little white dog in her arms. How bright and beautiful and girlish she looked! he thought; how truly she harmonised with all around her! surely she was happy now—happier than at first.

"There's the smoke, Nelly; we are just in time," said Robert; and in another minute they were on the platform, and Ellen had caught sight

of Hester's dark eyes, with a smile of recognition in them, as the train came slowly up, and stopped.

Robert stood aside while the two women exchanged their greeting, after the manner characteristic of each ; and during that brief interval he regarded Hester with some interest and curiosity. He had not seen her since she had so unexpectedly inherited her uncle's wealth,—he had hardly thought of her ; the old time in which they had been familiar, if not intimate, seemed very far past now ; he had lived all of his life that had been worth living since then. It occurred to him now for the first time that it might be curious to see how this young woman had borne a transition which could hardly fail to be trying. In the first place, he recognised that Hester Gould was elegantly dressed. He had become skilful in such observation now ; he who had not formerly had an idea on the subject, and could not have told whether his sister was attired in velvet or cotton ; but his close attention to every thing in which Katharine was concerned or interested, his ceaseless admiration of her, his keen perception of every

thing which adorned the beauty which he worshipped, had educated his eyes, and he perceived at once that Hester's toilette was perfect in its taste and appropriateness. Nothing appeared in her which could annoy Katharine's refined ideas; not the least touch of vulgarity, not the most transient embarrassment or pretension of manner, nothing to convey the smallest suggestion of the *nouveau riche*. With the same frank courtesy that she had displayed in their former relations Miss Gould received her host's welcome; with precisely the correct degree of interest she inquired for Mrs. Streightley; and with a totally unchanged manner she entered into conversation with Ellen, during the necessary delay which took place while the servants were securing the luggage.

As they drove to Middlemeads, Robert talked with his guest of the country around, of the gentlemen's seats which they passed, of the Buckinghamshire backwoods, and other topics appropriate to the occasion, but which had little interest for Ellen, who was anxious to put one of her idols *en rapport* with the other as soon as possible. Hester

had said something very civil, and perfectly sincere, about the pleasure she anticipated from seeing Middlemeads, and was listening attentively to Robert's anecdotes of the historical importance of the place, when Ellen said, in her peculiar interjectional fashion,

"O yes, it's all most delightful, and ever so grand, Hester; so different, you know, to Brighton and that, that I really should have been half afraid of it if it hadn't been for Katharine. She is so delightful, you can't think, Hester. I think she could make a cabin feel like a palace. I do so long for you to see her."

"You forget that I have already seen Mrs. Streightley several times, Ellen; and I cannot believe that my admiration can be increased on better acquaintance."

Robert looked delighted, but surprised; and was just about to speak, when Ellen began again.

"Yes, yes, I remember; you saw her at the famous *fête*—that *fête* which I shall always think, in spite of Decimus, a most fortunate and praiseworthy piece of worldliness and dissipation, for

there Robert fell in love with Katharine, and there I am sure Katharine fell in love with him, though I have never got her to tell me any thing about it—I suppose it's not the correct thing among fashionable people to talk about falling in love!—and then you just had a glimpse of her on her wedding-day; but I mean I want you to see her constantly in her own house, and to admire her as we do.”

“I could hardly venture to do that, Ellen,” said Miss Gould, in a tone which conveyed the lightest possible suggestion of ridicule of Ellen's enthusiasm, and would, therefore, have betrayed to any one thoroughly acquainted with Hester—supposing such an individual to exist—that her temper was momentarily disturbed. She was instantly conscious of the tone herself; and turning to Robert with unaffected good-humour, she said :

“The occasions which Ellen mentions were not the only ones on which I had the pleasure of seeing Mrs. Streightley. I think I know her by sight longer than you do.”

"Indeed! how was that?" asked Robert rather eagerly, for every thing in the past, as in the present, which regarded Katharine had a potent interest for him.

"I taught music to the Miss Morisons, who lived next door to Mr. Guyon, during two seasons," said Hester simply; "and as they seized upon every conceivable opportunity for neglecting their lessons, they made it a point to rush to the windows to see Miss Guyon going out to ride, and I never could resist the temptation of looking out with them. I like to see a woman on horseback who looks and rides as she does. I am not sure that I did not envy the gay cavalcade sometimes, when I used to see them set off, and had to turn to 'one, two, three, four—pray attend to your fingering,' and so forth, again."

"You will have horses in town too, Hester, won't you?" said Ellen; "and have cavalcades on your own account, and gallant cavaliers to escort you, as Katharine had?"

"I am not so sure of that," said Hester

demurely; "the Morison girls, who were very slang, used to talk about Miss Guyon's escort being always the 'best' men in London; and there was a Mr. Frere—her cousin, is he not?—whom they used to admire almost as enthusiastically as they admired her. Caroline, who was horribly silly, used to quote Tennyson's 'Guinevere' as they went by the windows: very appropriate to a London street, was it not?"

"Look, look, Hester!" said Ellen, jumping up in the carriage, "there's the first glimpse of Middlemeads;" and then the young lady occupied herself with pointing out every detail of the approach, until the carriage passed under the arch and drew up at the entrance, where Katharine was standing in the open doorway, pleased to gratify her sister-in-law to the utmost by the demonstrative kindness of her reception of Miss Gould.

"We were in capital time, Katharine," said Ellen, as the three ladies passed through the hall, "and had a delightful drive, hadn't we, Robert? O, he's gone off to the library, I suppose."

Katharine was much pleased with Hester Gould, and the little party at Middlemeads was apparently composed of the most harmonious elements. The great heiress was naturally an object of curiosity in that character; and Katharine was no more slow than Hester herself to perceive that her guest's presence lent an additional attraction in the eyes of the neighbourhood to the newly-mounted *ménage* at Middlemeads. It was not every country-house which had two such specimens of womanhood to show,—the one so beautiful, the other so rich; and the neighbourhood proved itself not undeserving of its opportunities. Lady Henmarsh had experienced some not unnatural pangs of apprehension lest the dignified dulness which her soul abhorred should beset her at Middlemeads. She had had her doubts about Robert Streightley's fitness for his new *rôle* in society; she had dreaded, she did not exactly know what, in Katharine; but her apprehensions proved utterly unfounded. She did not care to look beneath the surface, and that was all that could be desired. Mrs. Streightley dispensed a

splendid hospitality with perfect grace, and Robert had no desire save that in all things her pleasure should be done. Her pleasure was to fill her house with company, and to pass her life in a round of such amusements as were attainable in the country, previous to entering upon the London season with a brilliancy and splendour which should convince the world that she was one of the most fortunate persons in it, and leave herself no time to recur to any of the absurd fancies which had once beguiled her for a little. How absurd they were! She laughed at them now, and at herself; and yet the laugh was not entirely real. And sometimes she would think of Hester Gould's wealth with a dreadful pang of envy, but in which there was not an atom of sordid feeling.

Hester Gould turned every hour of her stay at Middlemeads to account. She was incapable of such a blunder as copying any one's manner; but she studied the best types with which she was brought in contact, and profited by them. She knew exactly the extent and value of such personal attractions as she possessed, as well as she

knew the exact sum of money which she owned; she understood her own advantages and defects to a nicety; she appreciated the utility of the interval thus attained for studying phases of society hitherto unknown, before entering on the great world; and she made the most of it. Impossible to unite self-possession, simplicity of tastes and manners, and sound common sense, more admirably than they were combined in Hester Gould. Impossible to be more popular and more impenetrable. Had she been in possession of all the truth, she could hardly have understood the "situation" more clearly than she understood it, aided only by her remarkable penetration and the quickening influence of concentrated anger. Had her heart been concerned in the scheme in which she had been defeated by the unconscious Katharine, and in which only her brain and her will had been active, she would have felt more acutely and more transiently; but as it was, her anger neither cooled nor decreased. It was characteristic of Hester that her changed position made not the least difference in her feelings. She knew that her

wealth gave her opportunities in comparison with which a marriage with Robert Streightley would have been but a meagre triumph; she knew that her defeat had been practically rendered no defeat at all by the freak of fortune which had endowed her with riches; but the knowledge had no effect on her. The ruling principle of her character, the egotism of an inflexible will, had suffered a deep wound, and she admitted no balm in such considerations to heal it. Katharine's had been the hand to deal this wound. As for Robert, "he never would have loved me," she said in her heart; "but I should have married him for all that." And she would punish Katharine—unless, indeed, fate should spare her the trouble. Of this vicarious vengeance she discerned a promising probability; for day by day she saw that Katharine was hardening. She was satisfied to perceive the result, without analysing the process very closely; and she discerned that her own presence, though the most unexceptionable relations subsisted between her and her hosts, had as sinister an influence as she could desire. She was not the

woman to employ unnecessary activity. If she could do mischief passively, so much the better, so much the safer. Hester's character had received by her defeat the impulse towards the development of evil which had hitherto been wanting, and more than once she had to recall her determination never to permit any passion to gain dominion over her. Hitherto her will had been stronger than any indication of passion she had ever felt; if it only proved so for the future, life would have no great harm in store for her.

Lady Henmarsh had taken the young heiress under her especial patronage (she had a genuine admiration for rich people); and before her visit to Middlemeads had terminated, it was arranged that Miss Gould should be promoted to the place vacated by Katharine, and should make her *début* in London society under the auspices of Lady Henmarsh.

CHAPTER IV.

CANAAN FROM PISGAH.

THE month of April was nearing its close, and the party at Middlemeads were beginning to think of separating, to meet again in the more exciting scenes of London life during the season.

A programme, including entertainments which should combine splendour and originality, to be given at the mansion in Portland Place, had been agreed upon, and perfect harmony reigned among the ladies. Miss Gould took a deep interest in the preparation of Mrs. Streightley's town-house, and had frequently accompanied Katharine to town, when she visited Portland Place to give new orders and observe the fulfilment of old ones. Katharine threw herself into this novel and decidedly exciting occupation with all the fervour of her age

and character. She interpreted and acted upon Robert's permission to do precisely as she pleased, to its fullest extent.

"Please yourself, dear, and you will please me," he had said to her; "you know I have not much taste for such things."

"Perhaps your mother—" Katharine had considered it polite to say—

"O no," Robert had answered hastily; "my mother would be less useful to you than myself. She has lived in a plain house and in a plain way all her life, and she would not in the least understand how the cage for so bright-plumaged a bird as you are should be decorated."

It was an awkward metaphor, an unfortunate pleasantry; and Robert felt it so as soon as he had uttered it, and hastily left his wife on the plea of letters to be answered, having received the briefest, coldest acknowledgment from her of a permission on which she proceeded to act immediately with much animation and entire recklessness of expense. While she was engaged thus, and when the time for the removal of the establishment to town was

drawing near, Katharine learned that Mrs. Stanbourne had arrived in England, and was desirous of seeing her, and making the acquaintance of her husband. The letter which conveyed this intelligence to Mrs. Streightley was not altogether and heartily welcomed by her. The one single individual in the world for whom Katharine felt perfect respect, respect in which her intellect was as active as her heart, was Mrs. Stanbourne; and yet, even though affection mingled largely with that sentiment, she could not feel real pleasure in the prospect of seeing her. She did not tell herself what it was she dreaded; but she knew in her heart that it was her true friend's clear-sightedness and her unbending rectitude. She had so shrunk from announcing her marriage to her, that Mr. Guyon had found himself obliged to undertake that very unpleasant task; a substitution which had surprised Mrs. Stanbourne much and hurt her a little; but she was a woman in whose disposition the small susceptibilities born of self-love had not much place, and she put the light mortification aside, and wrote to Katharine just such a kind

motherly letter as, under other circumstances, would have added to the happiness of a bride. But Katharine had read it hurriedly, with a flushed brow, and her rich red lip caught under her white teeth, and had put it away out of her sight. Nay more, she had put off answering it, until she might venture to disregard its tone and substance; and treating her marriage as an affair whose novelty had quite worn off, and to which any further reference would be out of place, had filled two sheets of paper with a pleasant, flippant account of her continental trip, and a lively sketch of some of the costumes which took her fancy among the Swiss peasantry. Katharine's letter pleased Mrs. Stanbourne as little as her father's had done; but she was a sensible as well as a feeling-hearted woman, and she recognised that explanation of any thing which excited her misgivings was not just then attainable. It must be waited for it; had better be waited for patiently; she would see Katharine as soon as possible after she should reach England, and in the mean time would write to her, as usual, not very often,

but very frankly and affectionately. She had adhered to this resolution ; and now she was about to see and discern for herself whether this marriage, whose exterior advantages were undeniable, was all that she could desire, or any part of what she had desired for this impetuous, unmanageable girl, whom she had always loved, and for whom she had always been apprehensive, with the well-grounded fear which is taught by experience and the knowledge of the human heart ; with that fear which can hardly fail to be awakened when one who has travelled far on the journey of life looks back and sees the young beginner joyously setting forth in delusive hope, and with the courage of ignorance.

The prompt invitation to Middlemeads by which Katharine replied to Mrs. Stanbourne's notification of her arrival in England was all that it should have been, in words ; and the acceptance was as prompt and affectionate.

"This day week, then, she will be here," Katharine said to herself, as she sat before her writing-table with the letter in her hand. "This day week.

I am glad the house is likely to be so full—I don't want to be alone with her. It is all so unlike her ideas—and she is so quick." Here Katharine sighed. "Well, after all, she knows I always liked money, and what money gives one in this world—and she knows I never was romantic. It's all very gay and splendid here; and if I don't care quite so much about it as I used to think I should—I must be a worse actress than I think I am, if she finds that out. One thing at least she does not know, and can never discover; one secret is at least inviolably my own. No one can ever guess that I cherished the delusion of love and truth, of a life lived for their sake; a life lived with a man who amused himself all the time, who made me love him *pour rire*."

So far as it went, Katharine's argument with herself was frank and well founded; but it did not go far enough, it did not extend to the acknowledgment of the real blot which she dreaded her friend's hitting. That Mrs. Stanbourne should regard her in the gravely responsible position of a wife, as wholly given up to empty amusements,

the pursuit of pleasure and excitement, and the lavish expenditure of money upon every trifle which took her fancy, was, she chose to persuade herself, what she dreaded. And this certainly was an impression to be deprecated; but it was only secondary, though she put it first. It was her conduct towards Robert which she really feared to find exposed to the keen, unembarrassed scrutiny of Mrs. Stanbourne, whom she knew to be a woman incapable of trifling with the ideal of duty either in theory or in practice. That she would discern her to be a wife without love for her husband, without gratitude for all his affection and observance, without sympathy for his tastes, observance of his wishes, or consideration for his feelings; a woman hardened, wilful, and selfish; who had made a marriage which was a bargain, and was not faithful to the spirit of her share in that bargain. If Mrs. Stanbourne's customary penetration did not fail her, this was what it would show her, under the surface of a life of gaiety, extravagance, and luxury. She felt in her conscience, whose voice she could not stifle, that

she was unjust towards the man who had given her not only money but love. True, she did not care for the love, she did not want it; but after all, it was the vehicle by which the money which she did want and did care for was conveyed to her; and there was an undeniable baseness, a failure of duty and propriety in her conduct, only the more flagrant because the sufferer by it was compelled to endure it uncomplainingly, because the injury was, so to speak, impalpable. Katharine was too clear-sighted not to perceive and understand her own shortcomings perfectly; and in her inmost heart she dreaded that Mrs. Stanbourne would understand them too. Plainly put, she knew the truth to be, that she was revenging on the man who had given her a brilliant and enviable position before the world; who had effectually screened her from scorn and malice, and made her an object of envy instead; the man who loved her with a fervour of admiration and devotion which served only to provoke and embitter her,—the deadly injury inflicted upon her by another, the baseness of whose conduct every womanly in-

stinct should have taught her to requite with contempt. She had done Robert Streightley the tremendous wrong of marrying him without loving him ; true, he knew it and accepted it, but it was none the less, in the light of a pure woman's conscience, a deadly wrong—and she had not made the slightest effort to retrieve or repair that wrong. If a transient impulse, ascribable to the elasticity of spirit of her age more than to any real motive of her conscience, had drawn her nearer to him for a little while, she had fallen away from him again in impatient weariness, and now each day seemed but to set them farther apart. And she could not even regret it ; she could feel no repentance, no wish to be different—that was the worst of it ; it was not that she desired the conditions of her domestic life to be altered, but only that she dreaded their discovery by Mrs. Stanbourne. Katharine's meditations were not, therefore, of the brightest ; and a second cause of embarrassment arose to trouble them. Lady Henmarsh and Mrs. Stanbourne were utterly uncongenial to each other, and yet

each occupied an exceptional position as regarded her: they would be certain to clash unpleasantly. It would have been easier to bear, had Lady Henmarsh not been there. Katharine must announce the expected visit to her *ci-devant* chaperone, and she felt exceedingly uncomfortable at the prospect. She had on several occasions narrowly escaped quarrelling with Lady Henmarsh *apropos* of Mrs. Stanbourne; and she thought it extremely likely that on this occasion they might quarrel outright. Katharine was not a person likely to defer doing any thing of the kind because it was unpleasant, so she went immediately to the south drawing-room, where she found Lady Henmarsh, Ellen, and Hester Gould. Lady Henmarsh was doing nothing, so far as her hands were concerned. Sunk in the luxurious depths of an easy-chair, she was looking out on the flower-garden and the statues, and talking to Hester Gould, who was seated on a footstool in the embrasure of the large window, and pulling the ears of Topaze, who was lying contentedly in her lap.

"Look at this faithless little creature, Mrs. Streightley," exclaimed Hester, as Katharine entered the room. "He actually followed me out of the breakfast-room this morning, in preference to you. Can you fancy any thing so base?"

"Topaze prefers lying on a silk dress to lying on a muslin one, Miss Gould," returned Katharine smiling; "and she is particularly fond of having her ears pulled. I have had no time to indulge her this morning; I have been busy with my letters. I have heard from papa, Lady Henmarsh."

"Indeed, my dear! I thought all his correspondence was reserved for his son-in-law. When is he coming?"

"Not just yet; indeed I fear he will not be able to manage to come to us before we go to town at all. But I have also heard from Mrs. Stanbourne. She has come to England, and she is so good as to promise us a visit. She names this day week for her arrival at Middlemeads."

"O, indeed!" said Lady Henmarsh in a satirical voice, and directing a glance at Hester

which satisfied Katharine that she had indulged in sarcasm concerning Mrs. Stanbourne to her new friend. "Well, I shall not have the pleasure of seeing her, and I daresay she will not particularly miss me. I was just going to tell you, my dear Kate, that Sir Timothy and I must really take a reluctant leave of Middlemeads on Wednesday. Sir Timothy has had letters from his steward requiring his immediate attention; and you know he is rather fidgety, and never satisfied unless he is on the spot."

Katharine did not know any thing of the kind, but she was quite content to take Sir Timothy's inquietude for granted; and she received Lady Henmarsh's explanation with perfect grace, and much internal satisfaction. The four ladies then had a great deal of animated conversation about all they intended to do, and the constant intercourse they hoped to establish in London; and the morning wore away very pleasantly. Katharine's spirits recovered their tone when she discovered that the meeting under circumstances of close association between Lady Henmarsh and

Mrs. Stanbourne, which she had so much dreaded, was not to take place. Hester was looking forward to her *début* in the character of a great heiress, under the auspices of the most agreeable married woman she had ever met, but whose character and disposition she read with equal precision and indifference. Ellen, who was to return to town with Hester, was sunk in a charming reverie of anticipation; for the Rev. Decimus hoped to be in London when she should arrive, and to be able to tell her to which of the most unhealthy and savage regions of the known world it was his desire and intention to convey her. Hester's visit would terminate a day or two after Mrs. Stanbourne's arrival. Ellen was very glad not to leave Middlemeads before; she was very anxious to see Katharine's friend and kinswoman. Hester did not care in the least about the matter. It was not likely that Mrs. Stanbourne could ever be of any importance to her; she had nothing to gain and nothing to lose by her; and Miss Gould was very little given to thoughts or surmises or the taking of interest concerning any matter which

did not immediately concern her. When the bell rang for luncheon, the ladies obeyed the summons; and Lady Henmarsh asked where was Mr. Streightley.

"Robert is gone to London," said Ellen. "He went by the first train, did he not, Katharine?"

"Yes, I believe so," answered Robert's wife carelessly. "He had business in town, I understood, and will probably not return until to-morrow."

She neither knew nor cared what the business was that had called her husband away; but Lady Henmarsh knew, and cared enough to feel irritated, if not sorry. She had had a letter also from Mr. Guyon—a more confidential one than the brief chatty epistle he had written to his daughter; and she knew that at the moment at which they mentioned him, he and Robert Streightley were closeted together, in the office in the City, in deep, and by no means pleasant, conversation. Miss Gould also had had some letters that morning, and one of them offered her

at least a suggestion of the nature of Robert's business in town. It was written by Mr. Thacker ; and among its rather voluminous contents Miss Gould read : " Old Guyon is going the pace tremendously ; it must kill in the end ;—even Robert Streightley—his patience can't hold out, I should think, if his purse can."

The week passed, unmarked by any remarkable incident. Lady Henmarsh carried off Sir Timothy on the appointed day, and bade Hester Gould farewell with much demonstrative affection ; which that young lady received with well-bred acquiescence, and which Katharine observed with mingled amusement and contempt.

" She never was half so fond of me," she thought ; " but that is easily understood. I never was rich while she could make any use of my money."

During this week Hester observed that Robert Streightley was more silent and dispirited than usual, and that not a day elapsed without his receiving a letter from Mr. Guyon. She felt some curiosity concerning the nature of these communications,

for she by no means imputed them to Mr. Guyon's affection for his son-in-law; but she was quite satisfied to wait for its gratification. Mr. Thacker was expected at Middlemeads, and she knew that she should discover much, if not all she wanted to know, from that gentleman: over whom her sagacity, firmness, and coolness of disposition, being qualities which he particularly admired, had secured her considerable and increasing influence. It was finally settled that Mr. Guyon should not visit his daughter at her country residence until the close of the season; an arrangement to which Mrs. Stanbourne's arrival had largely contributed. He was not afraid of her now; he had carried his point, and her influence was no longer to be dreaded; but he disliked her excessively, to an extent which amounted to antipathy; and he would not have encountered a week in a country-house in her society, and exposed to her observation, for any but a very large consideration. A slight to his daughter was a small one, so Mr. Guyon stayed away; and his daughter was decidedly relieved by his absence.

The apprehensions with which Katharine had regarded Mrs. Stanbourne's visit were fully realised. Her true friend discerned the change in the girl, for whom she felt sad and genuine interest; the woman whose life was full of duty steadily done perceived at once that in Katharine's that mainspring was wanting. She had felt apprehensive before; but her fear for Katharine's future grew with every hour of personal observation, with every fresh evidence of her total indifference to her husband which presented itself. She studied Robert Streightley closely, and she found in him much to like, to respect, and to esteem, but still something which puzzled and distressed her. She could not comprehend that a man could bear indifference, hardness, almost disdain, from a woman upon whom he had lavished such proofs of love, with so much submission as Robert endured them from Katharine withal. "If the man had done her a wrong, and she was graciously exercising some forbearance towards him, his manner might be what it is, with some reason and appropriateness; but as

things are, I cannot understand it. It is ruinous to her, fostering every evil tendency in her nature, putting her in a false and unnatural position; and it is positively unmanly on his part."

Mrs. Stanbourne meditated a good deal upon these things before she made up her mind to speak to Katharine. "*Entre l'arbre et l'écorce ne mets pas le doigt*," was a wholesome saying, and she bore it in mind; but "a word in season, how good it is!" had equal wisdom and superior authority; and compassionate affection for the young wife, who was blindly laying waste her own life and another's, who was pursuing the phantoms of pride, vanity, and pleasure, and turning her back on love and duty, carried the day over caution and mere worldly prudence. "I will tell her the truth," said Mrs. Stanbourne to herself. "It may turn her against me, she is so proud, and so violent in her temper; but no matter for that, if my speaking the truth may only do her good, and spare her something in the future. Katharine used to love me once, I sincerely believe; but I doubt whether she loves

any one now. What can have come over the girl?"

Among the many valuable qualities possessed by Katharine's one true friend, tact was conspicuous; and she exercised it on the present occasion. She selected her opportunity well, and she employed it with admirable discretion. There was no assumption of superiority, no "lecturing" tone in the grave, kind words which she addressed to Robert Streightley's wife, and in which she appealed to her sense of right, of duty, of delicacy, and of gratitude. Katharine could not deny the truth of any thing she said. She had married Robert Streightley because he was a rich man, and she had given him nothing in return, not only for all the money, but for all the love, which he lavished upon her, that it was in her power to withhold. The interview was a painful one to both parties; especially painful to Katharine, who had to hide from her friend the real motive which had actuated her in her marriage and in her subsequent conduct—a motive in which not only did there not exist the smallest excuse,

but which in reality increased her guiltiness towards the man whom she had married. She could not deny the truth; she could not impugn the force of the contrast presented by his conduct, which Mrs. Stanbourne painted to her in all the glowing colours of generosity, devotion, patience, and forbearance. Katharine felt, as she promised, that she never could forget the picture as drawn by her friend; it appealed to all that was best in her nature; it touched her innate nobility of soul. Nor did she forget it: in the time to come she bore it, every hue, every tint, in her memory.

Mrs. Stanbourne was surprised and delighted at the result of her hazardous interposition.

"I will not pretend to feel towards him what I do not feel," said Katharine, in her softest tones, as their conversation drew to a close; "but I will be more considerate of him—I will be less selfish—I will try to make him happier."

"Do so, my dear Katharine," said her faithful friend, "and depend on it, your own happiness will be the result. You have only to do your

duty to your husband, and the feelings to which you could not pretend, and ought not to feign, will arise in your heart spontaneously. Try to make him happy, because it is right and you owe it to him, and you will soon find your own happiness centred in him as his is in you."

The elder lady kissed the younger gravely, and left her. Katharine covered her face with her hands, and burst into tears. She very rarely wept; and now, though she thought, "Ah, if she only knew—if she only knew that love is dead for me!" there was refreshment in the transient passion of grief and self-reproach, and a new dawn of better days in the frank resolution with which Katharine determined on the fulfilment of her promise.

Mr. Thacker's promised visit to Middlemeads was duly paid. He seldom allowed himself a holiday; but this visit was an agreeable combination of pleasure and business, in which he thought he might very safely indulge. Besides, to have it known that he was staying with

Streightley of Bullion Lane; to have letters addressed to and to date them from "Middlemeads, Bucks;" to do the *grand seigneur* for a few days, and simultaneously to do a very excellent stroke of business,—all these things were pleasant to Daniel Thacker's soul. He arrived late, only in time to dress for dinner; during which repast he contrived to impress Mrs. Stanbourne, next to whom he was seated, with a holy horror of his appearance, manners, and conversation; for Mr. Thacker had what his sisters were in the habit of calling his "company manners" towards ladies, and which consisted either in repulsive insolence and would-be sarcasm, or rather more repulsive adulation. Something had tended to put Mr. Thacker into great spirits on this particular evening. The dinner had been very good, the wines excellent; there was an air of luxurious refinement all around him, and his immediate proximity to Mrs. Stanbourne was specially grateful. He knew her as a woman of mark even among persons of mark; and "he liked that kind of thing, damme!" as he was accustomed to re-

mark in moments of confidence. It mattered little to him that he received at first merely polite and at last chilling monosyllabic replies to his advances; he saw his way towards concocting a paragraph for the fashionable weekly paper in which his name should be included amongst a list of "swells" as being entertained at Middlemeads; and for what Mrs. Stanbourne really thought of him he cared but little. With the person with whom it was essential to him that he should stand well, he made much greater progress. Before the ladies retired for the night, and while Katharine was playing, he had flung himself on an ottoman where was seated Hester Gould, and had said in the nearest approach to a *demi-voix* which with his natural nasal intonation he could command—

"Are you an early riser, Miss Gould?"

Hester looked at him with a little astonishment, and without the slightest affectation of hauteur, at the sudden question, and replied, "Always, Mr. Thacker. I was compelled, as you know—who better?—to get up early to go to my pupils; and

since I have lost the necessity I have not discontinued the practice."

"That's right; it's a good habit; though, I suppose, one not much indulged in here. However, that's so much the better. I want a quiet half-hour's chat with you. Could you be in the grounds at eight to-morrow morning?"

A properly-regulated young lady would have blushed and exclaimed at this proposition; a flirt would have manipulated her fan, and nodded assent behind it. Hester Gould was neither, and did neither. She simply looked Mr. Thacker straight in the face, and said "Yes."

"All right," said Mr. Thacker. "There's a sun-dial, or something of the kind, I think I noticed, at the end of the house which fronts the bay-window of this room. If you could meet me there at eight, we could stroll on and have our talk without fear of interruption."

To which Hester Gould merely replied: "I know it; I will be there."

Daniel Thacker prided himself on his punctuality; but when, attired in an unmistakably

new suit of morning-dress, he arrived at the trysting-place the next morning, he found Miss Gould there before him. After the ordinary salutations they turned their backs on the house, and walked on side by side. Then Mr. Thacker told her that since she had been pleased to honour him with her confidence, and to employ him as her man of business, he had been incessantly turning in his mind a scheme for employing some of the large sums of ready-money which were lying at her command; and that after great cogitation, and while he was even thoroughly undecided what investment to recommend to her, by the merest chance an opportunity had offered which ought not to be missed, and which, unless she was warped by silly sentimentality, she ought certainly to profit by.

Miss Gould listened attentively, and then said: "Unless I am warped by silly sentimentality? I don't think that would ever stand in my way, Mr. Thacker. Of what nature is the investment you propose?"

"A mortgage on an estate, worth at least a third more than the money required to be raised."

“There seems very little sentimentality in that. So far as my small experience of business matters goes, I cannot conceive any thing more safe and prosaic. What can you mean, Mr. Thacker? Is it a case of widow and orphan, or of family estate held since the Conquest passing into the hands of a *parvenu*? Believe me, I’m adamant on both those points. If husband and father squanders and dissipates, widow and orphan must pay the penalty; if Hugo de Fitzurse is sold up, why should not Jones of Manchester buy Bruin Castle, moat, portcullis, battlements, and all?”

Such a sentiment as this delighted Daniel Thacker amazingly. He looked at his companion with intense admiration, as he said, “Of course; why not? But it’s scarcely that sort of sentimentality that I alluded to. Suppose the estate in question, on the mortgage of which the money was to be lent, had belonged to a friend—one whom you had—liked very much; what then?”

“What then? Now really, my dear Mr. Thacker, this appears to me to be slightly childish. Of course I should be extra glad to know that my

loan of the money had been serviceable to my friend. He, she, or it would be glad to know that I had good security; and as to the sentimentality of the affair, I don't see the least occasion for it, unless the friend could not pay, and there arose a necessity for—what do you call it?—foreclosing.”

Daniel Thacker laughed outright—a short, sharp, shrill laugh of intense enjoyment. “Miss Gould,” he said, “I cannot tell you how immensely I respect you. You are out and away the best woman of business I ever met. Then you seem to entertain this notion of the mortgage?”

“If you prove to me that it is all sound and sufficient. But what about the sentimentality? Where is the estate on which the money is to be lent?”

“I should say,” said Mr. Thacker, stopping short, and looking fixedly at her,—“I should say that at this moment we are standing in about the very middle of it.”

Hester Gould had stopped when her companion stopped; and as he said these words a bright flush overspread her cheeks, and a bright light flashed

into her eyes. That was all the outward and visible sign of the prospect which Thacker's speech had conjured up. Robert Streightley pressed for money—that money lent by her, and not repaid—she the mistress of that much-vaunted estate—she the heiress in due course of time dispossessing the man who slighted, and humbling the woman who rivalled her. All these thoughts glanced through Hester's mind, but the only sign of their presence was the flush of her cheek and the gleam of her eyes. Daniel Thacker marked both, but it was not his game to be reckoned appreciative in such matters; so he said:

“You are silent, Miss Gould. I thought my last announcement would settle the question.”

“Then you for once thought wrong, Mr. Thacker,” said Hester with an effort. “I am sorry to hear that Mr. Streightley requires this money; though probably a loan under such circumstances is the commonest thing in his experience of business. I am glad I am able to let him have it. I only make one stipulation, that my name does not appear in the matter. You will lend the

money, if you please, and Mr. Streight—the borrower will only hear of you in the transaction. Details we can arrange at another opportunity. Now shall we turn towards the house?”

“One moment, Miss Gould. I’m a bad hand at expressing myself in this kind of thing, but—but—” to his intense astonishment Mr. Thacker found himself turning very red and stammering audibly—“but the fact is, that there is a charm about you which—which—the way in which you adapt yourself to business, and your knowledge of the world; and—I can assure you I’ve never been looked upon as a marrying man, but if you would do me the honour to accept my hand, I would—”

“You would actually sacrifice yourself,” said Hester with a slight smile. “No, Mr. Thacker; I must say no. Believe me, I’m fully sensible of the honour, but I think we know a little too much of each other for a happy match. I should not care very much to be valued by my husband for the manner in which I ‘adapted myself to business,’ as you call it; and I’ve little doubt that when you take a wife, it will be some pretty girl

whose want of 'knowledge of the world' will not be her least recommendation. No; we will be very good friends, if you please, and as my man of business you will—but let us be candid—you will always make a good thing of me, without—. I think we understand each other?" And to this plain speech Mr. Thacker made no other protest than a shoulder-shrug.

Before Hester Gould went to bed that night she stood in the bay-window of her room, looking out upon the garden and the park beyond, bathed in the bright moonlight. For more than a quarter of an hour she stood thus, calmly contemplating the scene before her. Then she said, as she turned away, "Mistress of this place, which that proud woman downstairs exults so in!—mistress of this place, and Robert Streightley's creditor! It could not have been very deep-rooted, my love for that man. And yet I don't know; I think at one time it equalled my present hate of him—and of her; and then, God knows, it must have been deep enough!"

CHAPTER V.

CITY INTELLIGENCE.

ROBERT STREIGHTLEY's preoccupation and loss of spirits were not without due cause. In the half hour that had lapsed between his parting with his wife and sister, and his rejoining them when in colloquy with the Scotch gardener, he had gone through a phase of mental torture such as he had never before experienced. The Irish gentleman of good birth and vanished fortunes, who comes to London with just sufficient money to pay his entrance-fees to a fashionable club, to keep a garret in St. Alban's Place, and to hire a hack for the season from a livery-stable, and goes in to win the heart, or at all events the hand, of an heiress, gets to work at once, finds his *coup manqué* ever so many times during one season, and soon begins to look upon his rejection

as a mere matter of chance, and falls back on the grand principle of "better luck next time." The starving student, living from hand to mouth by the preparation of badly-paid work from grinding booksellers, eats his ninepenny plate of boiled beef, and hurries back to the reading-room of the British Museum, convinced that the day will come when his talent shall be appreciated and remunerated as it should be. The parish-doctor's assistant sings over his pestle, and slaps his spatula cheerfully on the china plate, confident that the retired Indian nabob, the wealthy widow with the quinsey, the measles-struck child of the countess, his successful care of all or one of whom will insure the pair-horse brougham, the M.D. degree, and the house in Saville Row, are all gradually working up towards him. "Hope springs eternal in the human breast;" and so long as we perceive no symptoms of dry-rot in our dearest aspirations, we are for the most part content to grind away, facing present difficulties manfully, and awaiting the result. But if you were to prove to the Irish gentleman that his

fascinating powers were on the wane; to the student that his overtaxed brain was giving way; to the doctor's assistant that he was every where considered a hopeless quack, you would cut away all their hold on life, and they would be whirled into that abyss of despondency in which thousands, similarly unfortunate, yearly perish.

A phase of torture very much allied to these described was being undergone by Robert Streightley. The "transaction" between him and Mr. Guyon, under which Katharine had become his wife, was constantly rising in his mind, and the heart-ache consequent thereon was only allayed by the thought that his possession of wealth enabled her to indulge in the extravagance which seemed to form a part and parcel of her life. He knew thoroughly well that, under her father's influence, he had won her by his riches, that they constituted his sole claim to respect in her eyes, that the fact of her having made "an excellent match," as bruited abroad by Lady Henmarsh and her set, meant that she had married a City man in a large way of business and with

a large amount of ready-money at command, which would be at her disposal, and enable her to indulge all the freaks and vagaries of her fancy. It was, after all, a poor shifting foundation, a mere quicksand, on which to base any structure of future happiness; but within the last few weeks, marking the improvement in his wife's spirits, and the increase of kindly feelings towards him, Robert had been content to accept it at all events as an instalment of conjugal bliss, and had flattered himself with the idea that when Katharine found all her thoughts anticipated, all her wishes gratified, she might have some—he did not like to think of it as gratitude, he wanted a feeling with a warmer name—towards him who lived only to do her bidding.

Feeling then against all his hopes and attempts at self-deception that in the money which he was enabled to place at his wife's command, and in the position which she was thereby enabled to obtain, lay his only chance of obtaining favour in the eyes of her, to gratify whose every whim was the only pleasure of his life, it may be imagined

with what feelings Robert Streightley read through a letter which came to him by the same post as brought Hester Gould's missive alluded to in the preceding chapter. It was from his confidential clerk, Mr. Foster, and ran thus :

“DEAR SIR,—Mr. Delley, the City editor of the *Bullionist*, who, as you know, has for many years supplied the house with reliable information, called in at 2 P.M. to see you ; but learning you would not be at business to-day, he sent for me to your private room, and told me he understood that Messrs. Needham, Nick, and Driver were in a very shaky state, owing to the failure of the Dublin branch of their bank, announced in to-day's City Intelligence. Knowing how heavy our account was against them (28,917*l.* 7*s.* 9*d.*), I started off at once to Fenchurch Street, but found the doors closed, the shutters up, and all business suspended. Mr. Delley has been here just now (5.30 P.M.), and talks of a shilling in the pound. Old Mr. Nick's death, and the large sums taken out of the bank by Mr. Needham junior, who was

only admitted as a partner two years ago, are said to have led to the wind-up. Please come up at once, if convenient. Your obedient servant,

J. FOSTER."

When Robert Streightley laid down this letter his hand trembled, his mouth was parched, and a film seemed to come over his eyes. It was not the sum lost, though that was very large, but a horrid sensation crossed him that retribution was attacking him in his most vulnerable part, that the joints in his armour had been spied out by the enemy, and that— Good God! if he were to lose that one hold upon his wife's gratitude! if he were compelled to tell her that the mere wretched substance to which she had been sacrificed was a sham and a swindle, that he— Pshaw! he sank down in his chair as these thoughts rushed through his mind; then he wiped his damp brow with his handkerchief, and shook himself together as it were with one strong effort, and rising, began to pace the room. What a weak, cowardly fool he was, he thought, thus to give way! This was a

blow undoubtedly,—what some of the Stock-Exchange fellows called a “facer;” but what of that? It could be met; and even if he lost all—if things turned out as badly as Foster predicted—well, thirty thousand pounds would not shake the credit of Streightley and Son. The mere repetition of the name seemed to rouse up innate business instincts which had been slumbering for some months—to call into action all those qualities which had made the man what he was; and he determined to go up to the City at once, and see for himself how the business stood. He waited for a minute or two until Ellen had strayed off into a bye-path in search of some flower, and then he said to his wife:

“I must leave you, Katharine, for a short time—four-and-twenty hours or so—not longer, dear.”

His voice dropped, and quivered a little with the natural emotion which he felt. He looked tenderly up at her, and drawing near her, tightly laid his hand on her arm. She was binding together a few flowers as he joined her. She

did not cease from her little task; but as she leisurely made the knot, and drew it tight with her teeth, she said, without looking up,

“O, indeed! business, I suppose?”

Robert Streightley started as though he had been shot. What else could he have expected? Did he anticipate a few tender words of regret at his necessitated absence; a tear or two dimming the bright eyes; a little pouting or peevishness at being left alone? Did he imagine that his wife might have made some inquiry as to the nature of the business which caused him to absent himself for twenty-four hours from his home? Such might have been the case in those preposterous matches which are arranged thoughtlessly and frivolously by two young people without calling their elders into council—in those ridiculous unions of hearts. But there was nothing in Robert Streightley's bargain, no clause in his bond, to warrant his expectation of any thing of the kind. “To have and to hold,” certainly; but to create sympathy, to awaken interest—no mention of either of these superfluities in the marriage-

contract. So he simply said, "Yes, dear ; business ;" and laid his lips to her cheek, and ordered his clothes to be packed, and drove away to the station.

He was uncomfortable, vacillating, wretched, all through the journey ; but he became his old self as he entered his offices. As the door of his private room closed behind him, as he marked the letters lying unopened on his desk, as he took his seat in the birch-framed, cane-bottomed chair which had been his seat ever since he first assumed his junior partnership, and as he saw old Foster standing at his elbow, with his paper of memoranda in his hand ready to read from,—Robert Streightley felt more genuine pleasure than he had for months. The mere fact of there being a difficulty—a hitch—something towards the elucidation of which the play of his business talents might tend—gave him life ; the *gaudia certaminis* inspired him ; and he set to work with such a zest, that old Foster, who had been shaking his head dolefully for the past few months, and thinking to himself—he would not have breathed such

an opinion for the world—that the glories of the great house of Streightley and Son were on the wane, took fresh heart, and indulged that evening in the enormity of an extra half-pint of stout at the chop-house where he took his dinner, in token of his delight.

Robert Streightley had not been more than a couple of hours at work, when a junior clerk entered, and told him that Mr. Guyon was outside in a cab, and had called to know if Mr. Streightley was in town. Bidden to show Mr. Guyon in, the junior clerk retired, immediately returning with Mr. Guyon, looking ten years younger than when Robert had last seen him; with his brown-black whiskers, and hair a little red-rusty from travel; with the strong trace of a silvery beard; with a rakish Glengarry cap on his head, a travelling suit and a courier's bag on his body. He entered with his usual impulsive bound, and had Streightley by both hands almost before the latter knew he had entered.

“The merest chance, my dear Robert,—the merest chance that I should have called in to-day.

Returning from Paris by the tidal, and having to stop at that most confounded of all confounded stations, London Bridge, and having to go through this cursed City,—no offence to you, my dear boy, but it's a dreadful hole,—I thought I'd just drop in and see whether you were in town."

Mr. Streightley assured Mr. Guyon—a somewhat supererogatory assurance—that he was in town, adding—of which there was no such corroborative testimony—that he was glad to see him.

"And Katharine?" asked Mr. Guyon, carefully smoothing his chin with his hand, and looking up under his eye-glass at his son-in-law,—
"Katharine is well?"

Katharine was quite well, Mr. Streightley thanked Mr. Guyon.

Mr. Guyon devoutly thanked heaven for that news. All the traces of that horrible—eh? at Martigny—quite gone, eh? Thought he should never have been able to dress himself that morning when he opened Streightley's note about Katharine's illness. His man thought he was

going to have a fit, and wanted to hasten for a doctor. Told the man he was a consummate ass; that what he, Mr. Guyon, was suffering from was feelings; and what the *dévil* did he, the man, know about them! And Katharine was well; and their place, Middlemeads—eh?—was perfection? O, he'd heard it here, there, and every where. Saw Roger Chevers at Boulogne, *en passant*, and had heard him say what a lovely place it was, and how leaving it had smashed up his old governor, root and branch. He was always talking of it, sir—said Roger—and wondering whether they'd cut into the avenue, or whether they left that view clear top of Two-Ash Hill, looking out the south way; or whether they'd put the stables in order, or built others where the Red Barn stood. That's what he should have done, if that cursed Brazilian mine had only turned up trumps! "Poor old Gov! he'll never forget Middlemeads!" said honest Roger, who drowned all thought of his lost patrimony in cheap brandy and the delights of perpetual pool, and dances at the *Etablissement des Bains*.

Ignoring the opinions and speculations of Mr. Roger Chevers, Robert Streightley acknowledged that Middlemeads was a fine place, and that he thought it had improved since it had been in his hands.

“Of course, my dear Robert, of course!” said Mr. Guyon; “your princely munificence, and what I think I may say—although my own child is in question—Katharine’s excellent taste, would be certain to do wonders for any place to which both could be simultaneously applied. *Allez, toujours, la jeunesse!* a French phrase which is roughly but not inadequately rendered by our own maxim of ‘Go it while you’re young!’ As for me, I’m an old bird—an old bird, begad, come back to an empty nest, to find the sticks and the straw and all that, but my young fledgling flown.” Mr. Guyon seemed quite affected at the allusion which he had thus made, and turned away his head, touching his eyes lightly with his handkerchief.

“I trust you will have no cause to repent of your sanction to your daughter’s flight, Mr.

Guyon," said Streightley, in a somewhat marked tone. "You recollect, before she left your roof, that—"

"My dear Robert! my dear Robert!" interposed the old gentleman; "do you think I have forgotten the confidence in which I told you that I was unworthy of the blessing of such a daughter—that I was by nature more fitted for—for less domestic delights. And indeed I—in Paris I have enjoyed myself most amazin'ly, most amazin'ly! That fellow, sir—whom I reckon when he lived in King Street—used to drive a doosid good cab, I reckon; he certainly has improved Paris wonderfully. But it's horribly expensive, my dear boy, horribly expensive. I—I ran rather short before I came away, and I was obliged to draw on you for a hundred—I was indeed!"

Streightley's face looked very stern as he heard this. "Do I understand you to say that you have drawn a bill on me for a hundred pounds, Mr. Guyon?"

"Yes, my dear boy, at a month; it'll be due—"

"That is a liberty which I permit no one to take, and which must never be repeated."

"A liberty, Robert?"

"A liberty, Mr. Guyon. Any man who draws a bill on another without first asking his friend's permission, takes what we of the City think an unwarrantable liberty. I am sure you erred in ignorance; but I must ask you to put a stop entirely to what seems to have become a habit with you—the reliance on me for money. I cannot make you any further advances, at least for the present."

This was a great blow for Mr. Guyon, who had been boasting, as was his wont, amongst his English acquaintances in Paris of the great wealth and generosity of his son-in-law. Nor had his French friends been unenlightened on the subject; "eel a milyonair—com voter Roschild vous savvy," the old gentleman had remarked with great self-satisfaction. And now to find his milch-cow refusing her supply, and as it were threatening him with her horns and heels, was any thing but pleasant. However, Mr. Guyon's temperament was

light and elastic ; he thought this determination of Streightley's would not last ; that some business matters had " put him out ;" that his anger would soon " blow over : " so he assured his son-in-law that he would remember what he had said ; and shaking hands fervently with him, skipped back to the cab, with the pleasant feeling that at least a quarter of the hundred pounds so judiciously drawn was at that moment safe in his trousers-pocket.

Then Robert Streightley called Foster into his room, and over books and ledgers, and commercial documents of all kinds, they held a consultation which lasted until late in the afternoon, and which proved to them both that the financial position of Streightley and Son had recently had the hardest blow, in the stopping of Messrs. Nick's bank, which it had received since it commenced operations of any magnitude.

" It comes at an awkward time too for you, sir," said old Mr. Foster. " We wanted all the ready cash we could lay our hands on just now ; there are the calls on the Benares Railroad, and

the deposits upon the Indian Peninsular—we're pretty deep in both of them—and there's six thousand for the lease in Portland Place, which of course must be paid at once. However, there's no reason to hold the Indian lines; they're both at a high premium; and as this bothering bank has crippled us for a bit, perhaps we had better sell and—"

"Not one share, Foster! not a single share! we'll stand to our guns, and the money shall be forthcoming when it's wanted, I'll take care of that. 'Forward!' has been the motto of Streightley and Son, Foster, as you know very well, and they're not going to change it now! You shall see the thirty thousand replaced, ay and doubled, before you retire on a pension, Foster, I promise you."

"There never was any one like you, Mr. Robert," said the old man, his eyes sparkling with pleasure; "when you say a thing will be, I know it will be, ay, as sure as the Bank of England." And so closed the business consultation.

The lease of the house in Portland Place, which

Mr. Foster had alluded to, was one of Robert Streightley's wedding-presents to his bride. They must have a town-house, of course, one befitting her position in society ; and partly because of its proximity to her father's residence, partly because the substantial appearance of the Portland-Place houses, and the knowledge that they had been for years in great demand among the moneyed classes, pleased him, he bought the lease of this house then in the market, had the house splendidly decorated while they were away, and on their return home had given Katharine *carte-blanche* as to its furniture. Katharine had gone twice to London during their stay at Middlemeads, and had held long consultations with the upholsterer, but Robert had not seen the house since he had purchased it.

He walked there now ; and though it was still in disorder, he was astounded at the magnificence of the decorations and the splendour of the furniture. Under the direction of Katharine's excellent taste, the *carte-blanche* given to the upholsterer had worked wonders. No duchess could have had a more perfectly-appointed house,

with nothing new or perky-looking about it: for what would be the use of money nowadays if it could not purchase antiquity in every thing save family?—and even that can be manufactured to order at the Heralds' College. So Robert Streightley walked in pleased astonishment among the high-backed chairs in the dining-room, and past the dark oak bookcases in the library, and through the pale-green drawing-rooms with the lovely hangings, the elegant *portières*, the buhl cabinets, the splendid glasses, the *étagères*, and all the nickenackery of upholstery. It was in this last paradise that Mr. Streightley found one of the partners of the upholstery-firm, a gentlemanly-looking man, who was surveying his men's work with much complacency. He bowed to Robert, and hoped he was pleased with what had been done. Mr. Streightley expressed himself as thoroughly satisfied; and Mr. Clinch then ventured to hope that he should not be considered troublesome if he were to ask for a cheque—not for the total, of course—just something on account, as workmen's wages must be paid, &c. Certainly; what amount did Messrs.

Clinch require? Mr. Walter Clinch "for self and partners" ventured to name the sum of twelve hundred pounds. Mr. Streightley, after the smallest possible start, made a memorandum in his pocket-book, and said that a cheque should be sent the next day.

Twelve hundred pounds for decorations and furniture—"on account" too, showing that there was perhaps as much again to pay! Katharine had certainly understood the word *carte-blanche* in its widest and most liberal sense. Twelve hundred pounds! and until his marriage he had lived in a little Brixton villa, the entire furniture of which was not worth one-third of the sum. Should he speak to his wife, should he—? Not he! now she was his wife, why was she his wife? Simply for the sake of his money—that money which he had placed at her command. The one happiness that he could offer her was the power of spending money, and should he refuse her that? The only salve that he could apply to his never-quiet conscience was that he had been enabled to supply her with the means of gratifying extravagant tastes

which must have remained ungratified had she married that—had she made that match which seemed so imminent when he had that never-to-be-forgotten interview with Mr. Guyon. No! Katharine had married him because he was a rich man, and a rich man he must remain to her. Besides, after all, what was her expenditure? what were these few hundred pounds to him? This horrible bank business had frightened him, he supposed; had it not happened, should he have given the smallest thought to such a trifle as Mr. Clinch's account?

Nevertheless, all that he had said to Foster he determined on carrying out. There should be no "drawing-in their horns," no curtailment in the operations of Streightley and Son. The money necessary to meet this bank failure must be raised somehow. He could get it in the City at an hour's notice. From the Bank of England downwards there were plenty of establishments ready to help the old-established firm. But such matters are talked of in the City, chatted over in the Bank parlour, whispered on 'Change, give matter for

gossip and shoulder-shrugs and eyebrow-liftings; and Robert's spirit shrunk from the idea that he or his firm could form the subject of any such speculations. And yet the money must be had. Where could he turn for it? Ah, a lucky thought! That man—Mr. Guyon's friend—what was his name? Thacker; a shrewd, clear-headed, clever man. He would go and see him, and talk the matter over.

CHAPTER VI.

THE END OF THE CLUE.

AND what was Charles Yeldham doing with himself during all these months? What indeed, save pursuing his "treadmill," daily increasing in reputation and practice, and accumulating more and more money for little Constance's dowry. The attorneys' clerks who climbed up his black staircase were more numerous than ever. Though never relaxing from his work for five minutes more than usual, he found himself compelled day by day to postpone the acceptance of cases, with the alternative of rejecting them altogether; and by the sheer force of perseverance and industry he was on the high road to fame and wealth. He did not relax now any thing like so much as when his old chum Gordon Frere shared his chambers with him :

there were no five minutes of chat and chaff and raillery; no listening to poor Gordon's confidences on love, debt, future career, now. The only time which Charley Yeldham allowed himself for talking of unprofessional matters was the half-hour during which he smoked his final pipe, and drank his glass of grog before going to bed; and then he would pass in review the curious events that had happened eight months before, and wonder at and reason over them. Three men running after one girl—three! Well, he could hardly count himself; though, certainly, he had thought more about Katharine Guyon than of any other woman before or since (and, let it be noted, that at this stage of his reflections he invariably produced from his desk a photographic *carte* which he had obtained of her, and gazed at it with great tenderness)—two men, we'll say, in hot pursuit, and Bob Sobersides winning the race! She must have been an outrageous flirt, that Miss Guyon, though! Dear old Charley Yeldham, with all his partiality, his romantic fondness for Katharine, is constrained to admit—an outrageous flirt.

Did not she carry-on with poor Gordon, fooling him to the top of his bent; meeting him at the Opera, at Botanical fêtes, at balls, and what not; flower from her bouquet, hand-pressure, appointment for the next day? And, after all, did she not whistle him down the wind, throw him away as one does a split-pen, and marry Robert Streightley? Ay, ay! ay, ay! Better the old desk and the long "treadmill"—better the flirtations with attorneys, and *billets-doux* from Bedford Row, all of which have some satisfactory result, at least, than the pinning of your faith on a woman's word, and the breaking of your heart by a woman's tricks! After all, it was perhaps better that such a girl should have married such a man as Robert Streightley. His steadiness would guide and control her; his wealth would enable her to indulge her taste for extravagance; and her dash and beauty would give pleasant *status* amongst his acquaintance. Nothing of that kind could have happened had she married poor Gordon Frere. Both young, extravagant, and reckless; both accustomed to have their own way; both fond of

flirtation ; neither understanding the theory of "give and take"—dear me ! dear me ! thought Charley Yeldham to himself, when the honeymoon was over, that would have been a disastrous business and a wretched *ménage*.

He had had several letters from Gordon, then private secretary to Lord —, acting minister at Rudolfsstadt ; letters full of complaints, which were ludicrous to the reader, though evidently insufferable to the writer. "It's a dull, wearying, dreary place, dear old boy," said Gordon ; "a beastly hole, with no one but besotted Germans to talk to, who all are either professors, when they bore you to death with their metaphysical cant, or half-fed dragoon officers, who make you long to kick them for their infernal impertinence. Old Wigsby, who has nothing to do, and who never opens a book or gives what ought to be his brains, but what I firmly believe is either tow or wool, the smallest exercise, passes his days in calling on the Frau Ober Consistorial Directorin or the Hochgeborner Herr, and his nights in sitting in their wretched twopenny theatres listening to their squealing

singers. He expects me to attend him on both occasions, and airs himself to this German-silver nobility, this veneered *haute noblesse*, in his patronage of me, d—n him (that's by way of parenthesis). On Wednesday nights we go to the Jäger Hof, where the Duke von Friedenstein lives when he is visible; and the entertainments there are something which would be too much even for you, Charley, old fellow—and you know you *can* stand a lot in the way of dulness! The old duke stands at the end of a big room, and bows away like mad to every one who comes in, until I wonder how his old spine holds out; and then the company wander through the rooms, and look at the curios and the pictures in the Kunst Kammer, which they've all of them seen a thousand times before; and then the squealing singers from the theatre tune up and shriek away for dear life in the music gallery. And then there's not a bad supper of a queer kind: big hams and potatoe-salad and herring salad, and hot salmon and cold jelly, and cold rice and jam, and some very decent light wines; and it's all over by ten o'clock, and we're off to

bed. Old Wigsby goes to these lets-off *en grande tenue*, and is, I am sure, seriously grieved that etiquette does not permit him to wear his court suit. He is the most stupendous ass you can conceive, and is always haranguing me about 'the position of a diplomatist,' and the 'representative of her Britannic Majesty;' he makes a *précis* of his washing-bills, and tells me that Lord Palmerston would not 'suffer my handwriting, which is frivolous and unformed.' What the deuce do I care? I only wish I was back in England—not for the reasons which you probably assign for the wish. All that is past and gone, and I sometimes grow hot all over when I think of the melodramatic farewell which I took of you, my dear old Charley, at the London Bridge station. I was an idiot then; but now that fire has burnt out, and left very cold ashes. I hope Mrs. Streightley is well and happy, with her charming husband. You'll grin at this, you old sceptic; but on my honour it's true. I haven't the smallest shadow of regret for K. G., and I don't care one straw for any woman in the world. But I do long to be out

of this infernal place, to be rid of old Wigsby and his pomposity and patronage, and to be out of earshot of this hard grating German cackle, which sometimes makes me stop my ears and kick with sheer rage. How are the old chambers looking, and how is their old owner? O, if I could only put my hands on his dear old broad shoulders, and have half-an-hour's chat with him, it would do me a deal of good! Yours always,—G. F.”

Ex uno disce omnes. This was a specimen of Gordon Frere's letters, and the perusal of which left Charley Yeldham any thing but satisfied with his friend's position. It was a good thing to think that he was cured of his love infatuation,—so cured that he could write calmly and even kindly of the traitress and his successful rival; but the monotony of his life, and the dull dreariness of Rudolfsstadt, were evidently eating into his soul. No good could come of the continuance of such distasteful work; and if Gordon Frere's career were to be any thing but one of blighted hopes and miserable vegetating, he must begin anew, and that too with all possible speed. So Yeldham,

after cogitating deeply over the matter, at last wrote to his friend, and told him he felt that the sooner he put an end to the business in which he was at present engaged, the better it would be for him, and the greater likelihood he would have in adopting some new profession, which he might pursue with pleasure and profit to himself. It was evident that Gordon was wasting his life in Rudolfstadt; and his friend's advice to him was, to make his adieux to his patron Wigsby, and return at once to London. Here the old chambers were ready to receive him; and if he were to make up his mind to go to the bar, Yeldham thought he might do well enough. "I don't mean to say that you'll soon be Attorney-General, young fellow, or that your opinions are likely to outweigh Chitty's; but you used to be fluent enough at the Apollo Debating Society; you've a certain knowledge of the world, and unparalleled impudence; and with the possession of these qualities, and with the aid which I can give you among the attorneys, I think you're likely before long to be able to gain your bread-

and-cheese at the Old Bailey: at all events, you will be in London, where a man ought to be, if ever he wants to profit by chances; and you'll be relieved from that harassing depression which seems to me to be sapping your character, and rendering you utterly degenerate."

It was a great relief to honest Charles Yeldham's mind to find that Gordon Frere had so readily, and to all appearance so effectually, got over his disappointment in regard to Katharine. Often and often in the few leisure minutes stolen from his work had Yeldham sat, with his pipe in his mouth, pondering over the curious history of Robert Streightley's marriage, and wondering how it might be influenced by Frere's return. For, recluse as he was, unworldly in the "society" sense, and nearly entirely given up to his work, Yeldham knew enough of human nature to feel perfectly certain that the marriage which Mr. Guyon so prided himself in having brought about was no love-match; that Streightley was by no means the kind of man to have awakened any passion in the breast of such a woman as Katharine;

and that when any strong opposing influence might be brought into play, his tenure on her fealty would be slight indeed. The only thing that puzzled Yeldham was, how the marriage had been managed, and how Kate's consent to it had been obtained. Unless Gordon Frere's vanity was most self-deceptive, this girl had undoubtedly been hotly in love with him within an ace of her engagement to Streightley. She was not by any means the sort of girl to be prevailed upon by parental coaxings or threats (though her father was exactly the man to employ both); and Robert had only his honesty of purpose, which was nothing to women in general—and his wealth, which was nothing to this woman in particular—to back his suit. There was something in the whole affair which was inexplicable to Charles Yeldham; and being inexplicable, he resolved never to rest until it was explained.

He had not seen Streightley, save in one or two casual street-meetings, since the marriage; and though he had received a warm invitation to Middlemeads, pressure of business had pre-

vented him from availing himself of it. Pressure of business, he said; but he wasted the whole of the evening on which he received the invitation (and on which, with his powers of working, he might have got through a great deal of work) in handling the dainty note, and conning it over and over, and in smoking many pipes, and thinking over many strange things. The note was in Katharine's hand, and ran thus:

"MY DEAR MR. YELDHAM,—Finding that his own efforts at inducing you to visit us are completely useless, Mr. Streightley asks me to try mine. I think I need scarcely say how happy we shall be to see you here, and how our utmost endeavours will be used to compensate you for your absence from those legal studies, in which, I am assured, you find your sole delight.—Very faithfully yours,

"KATHARINE STREIGHTLEY."

A simple note, with a very slight touch of very mild badinage. But Charles Yeldham was un-

accustomed to the receipt of letters from ladies, and this one certainly had a singular effect on him. What a pretty hand she wrote! how refreshing were the thin, slight, angular strokes after the rounded fists of the attorneys' clerks! how the dainty paper and brilliant monogram contrasted with the blue-wove and the wafer-stamp seal of his ordinary correspondence! And then, as he puffed at his pipe, and watched the blue vapour curling up around his head, Charley remembered the first, almost the only time he had ever seen her in that soft diaphanous dress at the Botanical Fête, where, even before he knew who she was, he had been sensible of her presence, and where he had felt himself completely subjugated by her loveliness, her elegance, and grace. They would laugh at him, Frere and some fellows of his acquaintance, as a stoic and a cynic,—but, after all, was it not better to go through life unvexed and untroubled by thoughts of lovely women, who were as far removed from you as the stars, than to endeavour to win them, and find yourself cast

down from star-height as the reward of your presumption? It was a dull life his, no doubt; with nothing to cheer it but the success of his work, and—good God! how beautiful she was! (here he took the photograph out); what perfect grace in the *pose* of her head, in the resting of her hands, in the long sweeping folds of her dress! Ah, if little Constance ever grew up to be any thing like that, there would be less need of the dower which her brother was so carefully putting by for her! No wonder Gordon Frere, young, impressible, buoyant, and hopeful, was desperately in love with such a beauty; no wonder that, looking at her, Robert Streightley forgot his ventures, his shares, his cautious dealings, and his long-headed speculations, and rushed into the matrimonial market, determined, at whatever cost, to carry off the prize.

How had Robert Streightley accomplished this result? The desire of being successful was intelligible; but how was the success arrived at? As Yeldham pondered over his question, during his midday interval of rest, and while

smoking his midday pipe, there came a knock at the oak; and opening it, Yeldham admitted the man of all others most likely to be able to answer him—Robert Streightley himself.

He came in wincing a little at the clouds of strong Cavendish which filled the barrister's room, and seated himself in the attorneys' chair. He looked pale and a little careworn, but he greeted Yeldham certainly as heartily as usual, and smiled as he said, "For once in his life!—bravo! for once in his life, I've found the machine without the steam up, and Charley Yeldham *not* at his desk!"

"Sir," replied Charley, "you come at a peculiar time; these are the five minutes of relaxation; so let us relax together! Robert, my boy, you're looking very seedy, white and peaky!"

"Well, I have been rather seedy; but I'm not very bad after all. I've had a good deal of worry lately, in one shape or another, and worry tells on me more than it did. Getting old, I suppose!"

"You ought to take a partner, Robert; I

mean a business partner. That affair of yours is too big to carry on single-handed. O, tell me, by the way—you won't misconstrue the reason of my asking—that confounded bank failure? Rumour says you were hit hard by it. Is it true?"

"Yes; for once in the course of events rumour hasn't lied. Our house was in heavily, and has suffered with the rest."

"That's part of your trouble, Robert?"

"Well, perhaps part; though I should scarcely say so, as the money-loss has been replaced, and Streightley and Son have passed the sponge across the slate, and look upon it as an unutterably bad debt."

"Lucky for them that they are able to do so; had it been my case, I should either have been playing rackets in Whitecross Street, or wearing a black wig and whiskers, and hiding myself as much as possible in a steamer bound to a country without an extradition treaty. I often think if you great commercial swells only knew how we professional men live, and the amount of the

balance presently standing to our credit at our bankers—”

“Yes; and if you professional men only knew how the commercial swells, as you call us, envy you your freedom from responsibility.”

“Freedom from responsibility, indeed! By the way, how’s your wife?”

“*Apropos* of responsibility! She’d take that as a compliment. She’s very well indeed, old boy, very well; not up in town yet. Still staying at Middlemeads, where you’ve never yet been, though both of us have done our best to get you there.”

“My dear Robert, what on earth would be the good of my arriving at your country place with a blue stuff bag full of papers, and enjoying my holiday in the country by sticking to your library from morning till night, reading cases, drawing pleas, and giving opinions? I feel perfectly certain that at your library-table, which is probably virgin-free from ink-blots, in your library-chair, which is probably comfortable, and surrounded by your country atmosphere, which of

course is pure and fresh, the few wits which I possess would leave me, and the most which I should do at Middlemeads would have the effect of utterly depriving me from ever earning five guineas again. No, I won't come to Middlemeads until I can—with a comfortable conscience—leave my blue bag behind me, and when that will be heaven only knows!"

"And in the mean time, and for the mere sake of your work, you drag your life on in these solitary chambers?"

"Listen to him! listen to Benedick the married man; so full of domestic happiness that he must crow over us poor bachelors. Very well, old fellow, as fate has willed it, is my life; the more work I have the happier I am: if I had not any, I should stick my head into the Temple fountain, and thereby incur the odium of the Benchers. No, I must not do that quite, while I've the old governor and Constance left, lest I should be supremely wretched; whereas in my work I'm thoroughly happy; and as for solitary chambers—well, they are solitary now, but they wern't once,

and won't be again soon, I think. My old chum's coming home."

"Your old chum? Who do you mean?"

"Why, the man who lived with me in these rooms before, and will share them again, I hope. Gordon Frere."

"Gordon Frere? Is he coming back to England—to London?" Robert Streightley's face turned pale as he asked this question, and his lips twitched with nervous anxiety.

"I hope so. I've written to him to try and persuade him to do so. He's a clever fellow, airy and specious, with what they call a good 'gift of the gab;' and I want him to try his fortune at the bar."

Streightley rose from his chair, took a few paces round the room, then settled himself again with his face shaded by his hand, looking at his friend.

"You were very intimate with this man Frere, Charley?" he asked in a hard dry voice, after a minute's pause.

"Intimate? Didn't he live here, I tell you?—

though you knew it long since, if you'll only give yourself the trouble to recollect."

"And you were thoroughly in his confidence?"

Charles Yeldham answered, "Entirely." But the word had scarcely escaped him when he saw the drift of the question, and wished he had pondered ere replying.

"Then you know, I suppose, that he—that he was—was in love with Miss Guyon—with my wife?"

"My dear Robert, what on earth are you talking about, what on earth—"

"Do you know it, or don't you?"

"I have heard it, of course, and—"

"You have heard it, of course; and now he's coming back! Coming back, curse him!"

"My dear Streightley, have you taken leave of your senses? What on earth has the young man's return—although in past times he might have had sufficient good taste to admire Miss Guyon and hope to win her, for which I honour him—yes! I say I honour him—what on earth

has his return to do with such an outbreak as this?"

"Never mind, Charles Yeldham! He shan't see her! Look here—mark this—he may be a friend of yours or not, but he shan't see her. I'll have no renewal of old friendships and all that! He shan't see her! Mr. Guyon shall take care of that. I'll appeal to him, and he'll back me up, I know."

"My dear Robert, if you're weak enough to have to appeal to your father-in-law in any matter in which your wife is concerned, I think you're to be pitied! However, don't fear! Any feeling which Frere may have had for Miss Guyon is quite past and gone, and now that she is Mrs. Streightley—"

"Ah! that's all very well; but he shan't see her. Mr. Guyon will back me up in that, I'm sure. I know he will. Good-bye, Charley;" and Mr. Streightley turned the handle of the door and left the chambers.

The attorneys whose cases Mr. Yeldham had in hand that day found the celebrated conveyancer a

little dilatory. Their clerks attending the next morning were bidden to call again later in the day. You see you don't get through much work when, your feet on the fender, and a pipe in your mouth, you sit for the whole afternoon staring at the grate and chewing the cud of mental reflection. " 'He shan't see her!' Why not? Streightley cannot be idiot enough to suppose that there is such fascination in Frere as to—O no! That's not it. 'He shan't see her'—that means they shan't meet, shan't speak, shan't— 'Mr. Guyon shall take care of that—he'll back me up'—Mr. Guyon!—they shan't meet! Mr. Guyon back me up!—they shan't meet! No answer to Gordon's proposal, no meeting with him at that ball—old Guyon's reply as to the pre-engagement and—Now, by the Lord, Robert Streightley, I only hope my thoughts are wrong; for if I'm right, you've been led by weakness or worse into a base conspiracy, and henceforth are no friend of mine!"

CHAPTER VII.

HESTER'S DEBUT.

THE judgment passed by Robert Streightley on Hester Gould, when he had critically examined her bearing under the novel and trying circumstances of her heiress-ship, was amply borne out by her subsequent conduct. She was a decided success; and though totally unknown to the members of the great world in which she had now taken her place, so that they had no opportunity of comparing her as she was in the present with what she had been in the past, her simplicity of manners, her unassuming tranquillity, as free from deprecation as from assertion, received a tribute of genuine admiration. Miss Gould was as much alive to the little touch of impertinence in this general sentiment as she was to its useful-

ness and agreeability ; but she enjoyed the latter, and did not resent the former.

“They are wonderfully kind and polite, and all that,” she said one day to Lady Henmarsh, while she was entering a long list of new names and addresses in her visiting-book ; “but it amuses me a little to observe that not one of them can quite conceal her surprise at discovering that I look and behave like a lady. How I delight in such *naïveté* ! They let me see, without the least disguise, that they expect me to be vulgar and underbred, but visit me because I am rich and certified by you.”

“It’s the way of the world, my dear Hester,” said her friend ; “and neither you nor I will change it, be assured.”

“I don’t want to change it, for my part,” said Hester ; “it suits me very well as it is.”

This gay colloquy took place shortly after Miss Gould had taken possession of her handsome and perfectly-appointed house at Palace Gardens. The programme agreed upon at Middlemeads had been faithfully carried out, and the

intercourse between Portland Place and Palace Gardens was frequent and affectionate. Miss Gould demeaned herself towards Robert and his wife with exemplary tact and propriety. Not the keenest and closest observer could have divined that she possessed a knowledge of the affairs of the one wholly unshared by the other, and that she had succeeded, by minute investigation and the art of inductive reasoning, at an understanding of the means by which the marriage which had thwarted her plans, and given her the first shock she had ever experienced of the humiliation of defeat, had been brought about, almost as clear as that possessed by the principals in the transaction. The firmness, the indifference, and the decision of Hester Gould's character had much attraction for Katharine, who found pleasure and amusement in watching that young lady's method of dealing with her novel position, and to whose proud nature the coolness and self-possession of Hester were peculiarly congenial. They were not confidential with each other; but then, how could they have been so? Katharine had a secret

in her life whose concealment had been of such immense importance to her that she had taken the one step which determines a woman's whole existence in order to secure that concealment. Outside that she had no confidences to bestow. On Hester's side there was still less frankness in their intercourse; but she would not have been confidential with Katharine, had there been no hidden link between them; she had never trusted any one fully. The nearest approach she had ever made or permitted to a confidential intimacy had been in Mr. Thacker's case; and she had begun to repent of even that limited *démarche* lately, since that gentleman had hinted at the hopes to which it had given rise.

"I might have found out all he has told me for myself, if I had only waited," she said in vexed soliloquy; "if I had only had patience, I need not have wanted him at all, and now there's no saying how troublesome he may think fit to be."

In this misgiving Hester Gould was entirely mistaken, and her entertaining it showed that she

had not read Mr. Thacker with her accustomed thoroughness and infallibility. Daniel knew when Miss Gould refused him, in the matter-of-fact and reasonable fashion she had done, that she was perfectly in earnest, clearly in the right, and immutable in her resolution. He had no more notion of annoying her with a renewal of his addresses than he had of resenting their rejection. He must have liked her very much, and have seen many advantages in addition to its pecuniary attractions in the scheme of such a marriage; for Mr. Daniel Thacker was as little of a marrying-man as any individual in London, but he was quite incapable of such a *bêtise* as persisting in an unwelcome suit, or exhibiting, indeed of feeling, the slightest offence. Hester Gould was the sort of woman, being an heiress, whom it would have been pleasant and advisable to marry; but as such an arrangement was not practicable, he fell back upon the other and less hazardous alternative—that of fostering and preserving confidential relations with her. If she was not to be his wife—and he knew the moment she

said "no" that that was not to be—she should remain his very good friend, in the real meaning of the term. He believed he had found out what her game had been in the past (that game she had lost, as it seemed to him, by waiting too confidently); he acknowledged that he did not know the nature of that which she meant to play in the future; but if any one was ever to know it, he would be that person, with her consent or without it. He had felt at once the change that had come over her after his luckless proposal; he had discerned her imperfect appreciation of his *savoir faire*; but he was neither offended nor afraid. He knew he could safely trust his own manner and time to convince her that he had accepted her decision as final, that she had no importunity to fear on his part.

The result had fully justified Mr. Thacker's anticipations, and his relations with Hester were permanently established on a footing of as much mutual reliance as was possible to the nature of either, and the frank interchange of mutual good services. Mr. Thacker was unfeignedly pleased

when he learned from the voice of rumour that the shipowner's heiress was becoming quite the fashion, and when he perceived by her brightened expression, her fresher colour, and the added vivacity of her manner and bearing, that Miss Gould entered with sincere enjoyment into the pleasures within her reach. A youth of well-concealed ambition, of self-repression, of toil, had not hardened and deadened and narrowed her, as it might have done a weaker nature; there was no active poison of cynicism in her knowledge of the world; and her coolheadedness, while it secured her from deception, did not err on the joyless side of utter disbelief. She enjoyed life as a connoisseur, not as an enthusiast—as an epicure, not as a gourmand; but she did enjoy it both well and wisely.

Circumstances favoured Miss Gould very decidedly. She was sufficiently attractive to be admired by men, and not so aggressively beautiful as to be hated by women. She did not in the least overrate her own personal charms, or the powers of her mind; but she knew that she

was good-looking and clever enough to be admired in society, independently of the wealth which had been her passport into it; while other women would console themselves for her success, and explain it on the grounds of that wealth solely. She had found herself admitted at once into the best of the society in which Katharine Guyon had moved before her marriage, and the circle was constantly expanding. Lady Henmarsh was more popular as the chaperone of a well-looking and richly-dowered heiress than as the chaperone of a well-connected beauty with no money, and a detrimental though pleasant papa. Miss Guyon's remarkably sensible and commendable marriage had also shed reflected glory upon Lady Henmarsh; and as the dangerous beauty was dangerous no longer, but, on the contrary, a decided acquisition, being excessively rich, and possessing a praiseworthy taste for expensive hospitalities, all the petty jealousies and envies excited by Miss Guyon were forgiven to "that dear creature Mrs. Streightley."

Thus the world was to all seeming very fair

and bright before the two young women whom a chance had brought together, to be thenceforth inextricably intermingled in each other's lives.

It belonged to the well-regulated completeness of Hester Gould's character, to the firmness of a woman in whom there was nothing little, however much there might be that was bad, that she never neglected a friend, never forgot a kindness, never overlooked a former claim on her consideration or gratitude. She was incapable of the meanness of disregarding those who had aided her when her lot was one of poverty and obscurity, and equally incapable of the impertinence of patronage. She felt gratitude, and she displayed it simply, genuinely, appropriately, with the true and delicate tact which was one of the finer features of her character. She had provided for the comfort of Aunt Lavinia as carefully as for her own in the arrangements of the handsome house, which the good old lady regarded with mingled admiration and misgiving. She had explained to her aunt that all the requirements of the world would be fulfilled by the arrangements into which she had

entered with Lady Henmarsh; that she would never be expected to do violence to her principles by partaking of the dangerous and delusive delights to which her niece's novel position afforded her access; and she gave her *carte-blanche* for as many entertainments of the substantial-tea description, which they particularly affected, as her favourite "ministers" could be prevailed on to accept. Nor was her attention to her aunt limited to such formal provisions for her comfort. No pleasure, no hurry, no press of engagements, none of the flutter of popularity and general request into which Miss Gould soon fell, ever induced her to neglect the commonplace but worthy woman who had befriended her youth and shared her evil days. A portion of every morning was spent with Aunt Lavinia; and a visit to the quiet spinster preceded invariably the fulfilment of her evening engagements, over which her aunt would sigh furtively, and concerning which she reposed many mournful confidences and misgivings in sundry clerical breasts, without, however, feeling any distressingly deep conviction of the enormity of her niece's be-

haviour. Hester's old school-mistress had not been forgotten. The modest sum which the labour of half a lifetime had painfully accumulated, but which had yet some years to gather ere it could suffice for even such a humble maintenance as the well-nigh worn-out teacher longed for, was supplemented by the old pupil, to whom Miss Nickson never "could take;" and Laburnum Lodge, with the inky and lacerated desks, the dreary fly-blown maps, and the dreadful jangling rattletrap pianos, was disposed of by private contract. Once every week Hester Gould's brougham might be seen before the little gate of a pretty little cottage at Fulham; and Hester's figure, grown graceful now, and clad in elegant attire, might be recognised seated in the little parlour-window, as she gave an hour of the time on which society made insatiable demands to the woman who had done her duty to the orphan girl for conscience' sake.

She was no less considerate of those to whom her former obligations were of another kind, and must be redeemed in a different way. Among

their number were the Hampstead Hebrews, Rachel and Rebecca Thacker, and Ellen Streightley. To the dark-browed sisters of her confidential friend Miss Gould extended every social advantage within her power to compass for them. They found their lives wonderfully brightened, and their ideas much expanded under Hester's influence; and they became more enthusiastically fond of her than ever.

Ellen Streightley had become less enthusiastic about Katharine since she had been in town. The constant stir, the fashionable jargon, the incessant familiar mention of places, and persons, and circumstances, all foreign to her knowledge, her tastes, and her ideas, troubled and confused her. The same sort of thing had existed at Middlemeads indeed, but on a lesser scale; and then Ellen had had Hester to support her, and she had not felt so insignificant, so lost, as she felt now, in the ever-shifting, ever-thronging crowd in Portland Place. Katharine was as kind to her as ever, but she had no time to occupy herself with her; and the romantic vision of sisterly confidence, which

had made her sojourn at Middlemeads delightful to Ellen, vanished away before the realism of the tumultuous frivolity of London life. Ellen had been enchanted with Middlemeads, but the house in Portland Place alarmed more than it pleased her. She remembered penitently the warnings of Decimus, who was soon coming back now—a circumstance which rendered them all the more terrible; she was chilled by the cool undemonstrative disapproval of her mother, who had but once entered her son's splendid house; she felt out of her place there; she was no longer at home with Katharine as she had been at Middlemeads; here she was only one of her sister-in-law's innumerable guests. But when Ellen was with Hester Gould she had no such feeling. Hester was quite unaltered, enjoyed as much leisure, and was as well disposed to share it with her friend as in the old days. Hester's house was very handsome, and her establishment was very imposing, and in all things different from the Brixton villa; but Ellen was not dazzled and bewildered and put at a disadvantage by this difference, as she was by that of

Katharine's house and manner of living ; she did not feel like a stranger at Palace Gardens. Hester would receive her as calmly and pleasantly as though no afternoon engagements were in contemplation ; would listen to all her simple, eager, unimpressive confidences with unwavering patience ; would listen even to the outpourings of the honest missionary, who had a habit of digressing into sermons in his love-letters ; in short, Hester took a sound and serious interest in Ellen's fate. Miss Gould excessively disliked the deportation of her friend to foreign, and probably cannibal, parts, and had given much consideration to the question whether it might not be possible to restrain the ardour of the Rev. Decimus by the mundane process of purchasing him a living at home. She had very little doubt of being able to procure him the advantages of heathen society, provided he did not insist on black pagans. Down in Staffordshire now, or in outlying London districts, or among the truly rural population of Devonshire, he might surely find hideous ignorance, crime, and brutish unconsciousness of any thing but the lowest instincts of

nature, flourishing as luxuriantly as in the Feejee or the Andaman Islands. If the police reports spoke truth, there was room for the evolutions of a whole noble army of martyrs in picturesque and prosperous England; and Decimus might be quite as useful, while Ellen would be infinitely more safe. So Hester thought about the matter, and came to the conclusion—excusable to her ignorance, and deducible from her experience of the ease with which every thing one wants can be had for money—that a living in British heathendom might be purchased. She did not impart her ideas to Robert Streightley, for she had her own reasons for knowing that he was not in a condition to receive any proposition involving the expenditure of ready-money with much favour just then; but she took Mr. Thacker into her confidence; and as that gentleman's religious persuasion prevented his feeling any scruples concerning a transaction of the kind, he undertook to buy a living for Hester's unconscious *protégé* with as much alacrity and unconcern as he would have undertaken to hire an opera-box or to match a carriage-horse. "Re-

member, if you want a presentation likely to fall in soon, you can't get one cheap," was his sole demurrer when Miss Gould explained, with the utmost *naïveté*, the object of her wishes.

"I don't want to get it cheap, Mr. Thacker," replied Miss Gould. "Provided it's comfortable, and there's enough to do to keep the pocket-Apostle busy, and it's a wholesome place for Ellen, and not dangerous in the way of strikes and mill-burnings,—I am content. I don't think I should like it *too* rural and picturesque, please, because the murders in places of that sort are always so very horrible."

"By Jove! she gives me her directions as if it were a semi-detached villa with a good croquet-lawn she wanted," said Mr. Thacker, as he left Hester's presence, having cheerfully undertaken the somewhat difficult task she had imposed upon him. "There's nothing on earth to equal the unreasonableness of even the most reasonable woman, and she certainly is that. Not bad for an unconscious bit of satire either on Christian

notions in general, — would be nuts to some of our people, I daresay."

The season was at its height, and all London seemed abandoned to the pursuit of pleasure, almost as completely as the gay capital of France in its normal condition;—all London, that is to say, except the few hundreds of thousands who were suffering, dying, bearing all the ills and miseries of life, unseen and unheard by their more fortunate brethren, for whom the hour of calamity had not yet sounded. Among the most fashionable of the fashionable *réunions* fixed for one brilliant night in June,—a night on which the fields and trees, the rivers and the gardens, were bathed in moonlight, and fanned by warm perfumed air; a night on which all nature was wrapped in a trance of delight,—was Mrs. Pendarvis's ball. Her ball *par excellence*, be it observed; for she "opened her rooms" for dancing and music, for charades and kettledrums, for every conceivable purpose for which people could be gathered together, a most satisfactory number

of times during the season. But this was a grand, an exceptional occasion,—a yearly event, which found record in the chronicles of the doings of the magnates of society, and formed an epoch in the history of each successive year.

Katharine Streightley and her husband were going to this ball. Miss Guyon had never missed the grand occasion since she had been “out,” and its last recurrence had been memorable to her. She remembered it well as she sat under her maid’s hands, and suffered herself to be attired far more splendidly than usual. She took a secret pleasure in forcing upon her own attention the contrast between the past and the present on this night. When her toilet was an accomplished fact, she stood before her glass and gazed upon her radiant figure, clothed in the richest white satin, and decorated with the valuable and quaintly-set diamonds which had been her mother’s sole legacy to her, and a thrill of irrepressible triumph ran through her whole frame. She felt her own beauty as she had never felt it before; and she acknowledged that

it was very pleasant to have the means of adorning it so lavishly, of adding so much to its power. Her toilet-table was covered with cases in which gems of great value and beauty were nestled away in green-velvet niches, or displayed boastfully upon backgrounds of satin; but she had left them all undisturbed; her mother's diamonds should be her only ornaments that night. She desired her maid to bring more lights, and set them about the room, so as to show her her own figure in every point of view. The woman obeyed, with some surprise: this was not like Mrs. Streightley, who, though inordinately extravagant, was not practically vain, with the kind of vanity which impresses itself upon the attention of a waiting-woman.

She was looking over her white shoulder at the reflection in the long glass behind her, and her maid was standing by with a heap of soft white wrapping drapery on her arm, when Robert knocked at the door of her dressing-room. She bade him "come in," in a pleasant voice, and he did so.

enchantress she had appeared to him then,—what an unending spell she had cast upon him. There was no wrath, no bitterness in Katharine's heart that night, though the remembrances evoked were all of the kind calculated to provoke them. Time, and the unfailing, persevering love of this man,—love which she wondered at, and which had begun to touch her heart,—were working on her proud nature. She listened to him with a smile, with a faint, beautiful blush. She was glad that she had pleased him; it was not hard to do so: to wear a gorgeous ornament like that, and be thanked for it, was not a great sacrifice. To be so passionately admired by one's own husband was not unpleasant. Katharine was quite aware that it was not a very common case. Their carriage fell into the line; the light of many lamps was flitting about. She threw her cloak off the arm that bore the bracelet, and admired the splendid jewel, rippling with many-coloured light:

“It is extremely beautiful, Robert,” she said.
“I like it better than any of your presents. It was your first, you know:”

He did know ; and he also knew that this was the first, the very first word he had ever heard from his wife's lips which implied any sentiment concerning the past connected with him. A fresh tide of hope and joy welled up in his heart ; and as she laid her hand lightly in his, and let it rest there until their turn had come, and the carriage drew up under the striped awning, surrounded with a gaping crowd of idlers collected to see the ball-goers, Robert Streightley was happier than he had ever been in his life before.

Mrs. Pendarvis's house was large, but the fashion and success of a ball appear to depend on the disregard of proportion between the room and company ; and when it is said that this ball was brilliantly successful, it becomes unnecessary to state that it was excessively crowded. Robert and Katharine were detained for some time on the staircase, but the delay was not tedious ; for they encountered a few scores of their acquaintances, and Robert had the satisfaction, which in his present happy mood was unmixed, of observing the universal admiration excited by his lovely

wife. At the top of the first flight of stairs there was a large recess, or rather room, beautifully hung with muslin and lace, and profusely decorated with flowers and odorous plants. A few route-seats were placed in this apartment, which was only a little less crowded than the dancing-rooms and the staircase. When Robert and Katharine reached this temporary harbour they found Lady Henmarsh in possession of one of the seats, and were immediately greeted by her with her accustomed warmth.

"Miss Gould is here, of course?" asked Katharine.

"Yes, she is dancing. How well you are looking, Katharine! I see you are wearing your diamonds to-night; very becoming indeed; that serpent is beautiful. You have such taste, Mrs. Streightley."

"Come, Robert, we must really try to make our bow to Mrs. Pendarvis," said Katharine rather impatiently; and they proceeded on their journey to the second floor. There they found Mrs. Pendarvis, and several of Katharine's ha-

bitual partners. In a minute she had joined the throng in the dancing-room, and Robert was engaged in the double task of squeezing himself into as small a space as possible along the door-jamb, and trying to follow his wife's graceful figure through the distracting evolutions of a valse. When he had succeeded in seeing her through two or three rounds, he thought he would go down and find Lady Henmarsh; and he was just moving for the purpose, when a lady and gentleman came past him from the dancing-room, and the lady stopped and held out her hand. It was Hester Gould, beautifully dressed, in the highest spirits, and looking unusually well, even handsome, as Robert felt instinctively in the moment during which his eyes rested on her. It was only a moment, however, for they turned to her companion. The gentleman with whom Miss Gould had been dancing, with whom she was now going in search of Lady Henmarsh, was Gordon Frere.

Katharine had seen him also. In a whirl of

the valse her eyes had met his, as she and her partner passed him and his. She saw his fair hair, his blue eyes, the smile she remembered so well; she heard his low pleasant laugh, and at the same instant he looked at her and she at him, and they were apart again. Then he led Hester from the dancing-room, and down to the canopied recess where Lady Henmarsh sat, and where he remained for some time, laughing and chatting with his animated and attractive partner. He had seen Katharine; and the result had been just what he had told Yeldham he knew it would be. He was ready to acknowledge her as beautiful and fascinating as ever, but he did not mind seeing her a bit now. He would have been an ass to have married at all in his circumstances, and she did quite right to make a good match when she got the chance. She shouldn't have flirted with him and jilted him as she had done, to be sure; but then women were all alike, and it hadn't hurt him much after all. He was delighted to see her looking so well, and to believe that she was very happy; and, by Jove, he was going to

enjoy himself, and not think about love and marriage until he could afford such luxuries.

Lady Henmarsh had felt an acute pang of fear when she recognised Gordon Frere; but she soon quieted it by the timely reflection that no one could prove her share in the transactions of the past, and no one could unmarry Katharine, or take the money he had made by the marriage out of cousin Ned's pocket.

"I hope Katharine won't make a fool of herself," she thought, as she watched her ascend the stairs with her husband, and thought of the inevitable meeting before her; "but if she is inclined to do it, nobody can prevent her, and it's no business of mine. What can have brought the idle young fool back, I wonder? I thought he was safe for five years at least, and then promotion to Russia, or some equally desirable place." And when Hester Gould brought Gordon Frere down to the recess, Lady Henmarsh read in her face that she was pleased with the young man, and desirous that she should be gracious to him; so, as Lady Henmarsh found

it convenient to further Miss Gould's pleasure just then to the utmost of her power, she was gracious to Gordon Frere, congratulated him on his return to London, and gave him to understand that Sir Timothy would be charmed to see him at Cavendish Square.

The ball terminated as brilliantly as it had begun; and Katharine was the gayest of the gay, the brightest of the bright. She stayed very late, and she danced incessantly. Again and again she found herself close to Gordon Frere, and once she was so placed that she had to choose between speaking to him and "cutting him dead." She took counsel of her pride; she remembered that if, as seemed likely, he was remaining in London, she must necessarily meet him often, and she decided on speaking to him. They were on the staircase, she going down, he coming up, with Hester on his arm,—he had danced several times with her that night, as Katharine had remarked,—when she bowed to him, and said,

"How do you do, Mr. Frere? Have you been long in town?"

"A few days only, Mrs. Streightley. I hope Mr. Guyon is well?"

"Quite well, thank you."

Again she bowed, and passed him; and thus they met and parted, who, when last they met, had parted with the brightest and most blessed hope which ever gilds life for youth and love.

Robert and Katharine drove home in silence, which each hoped might be imputed by the other to fatigue. With her remembrance was busy, with him remorse and shame.

CHAPTER VIII.

MARRIED FOR LOVE.

MRS. STREIGHTLEY met Gordon Frere frequently during the remainder of the month of June. She met him at balls and dinner-parties, at fêtes and promenades, and riding in the Park. She was distantly civil on these occasions; and he carefully, but reluctantly, modelled his demeanour on hers. "She is so awfully stiff and stand-offish," he would say to himself, when Katharine had bowed to him coldly or spoken in a tone of icy indifference; "it seems almost as if she couldn't forgive herself. I'm sure I forgive her; more than that,—by Jove! I'm very much obliged to her. We should both have been up a tree by this time if we had been married, Treasury appointment notwithstanding. What a beauty she

is, though! and Streightley's not half a bad fellow either, though we used to make such fun of him. 'The City man' she called him, like a deceitful minx as she was, and she going to marry him all the time! However, I must not think of that, or I shall be getting angry again." And from this soliloquy, and from others like it, in which he indulged, it would appear that Mr. Gordon Frere's sentiments were not of the deep and lasting order, and that his friend Yeldham had formed a tolerably correct estimate of his character. He was of that constitution, and at that time of life, when a few months seem like an eternity; and he had come back to London fancy-free, and if a little wiser, a little more capable of acting from interested motives, not materially corrupted. He would not, probably, allow himself to fall in love with any woman for the future whom it would be imprudent to marry; but neither would he marry any woman, no matter how rich, whom he could not love.

Katharine's demeanour towards Gordon Frere was an unspeakable relief to Robert Streightley,

whose first impulsive feeling on seeing Frere was dread of an explanation, which might lead to a discovery. His brief vision of happiness was dispelled by the sight of the young man's face, and he shrunk with a painful reluctance from the interchange of the ordinary civilities of society with one whom he had so deeply injured. In vain did he try to find relief in the remembrance of all that Katharine had gained by her marriage with him; in vain did he watch the happy *insouciance*, the heart-whole gaiety of Frere, and argue from them the lightness and instability of the sentiment with which he had regarded Katharine. His conscience was awake, and not any sophistry could lull it to sleep again.

Mr. Guyon had been among the earliest of Gordon Frere's former acquaintances to hear of his abandonment of diplomatic life, and his return to London. He was aware of these circumstances before he received one of cousin Hetty's confidential little notes, in which she mentioned, in a tone of alarm and judicious warning, having seen Mr. Frere at Mrs. Pendarvis's ball. Mr. Guyon

had met his young friend a day before that festivity; had joked with him pleasantly about his "butterfly" qualities; had congratulated him upon his return to the centre of civilisation; and had asked him whether he had met the Streightleys,—all with a pleasant impudence which Gordon Frere was fairly forced to admire, and found it impossible to resent. Mr. Guyon was not for a moment visited by the misgivings which had disturbed his more sensitive son-in-law; but he divined that Robert, for whom he entertained, in certain respects, a good-natured contempt, would be uncomfortable about Frere's return; and he resolved to console him, at the risk of offending his pride by the momentary revival of a subject never mentioned between them. Accordingly he dropped in to breakfast at Portland Place two days after the ball and the meeting, and found, as he expected, his son-in-law alone.

"Katharine not down? Nothing wrong, I hope?" asked the affectionate parent.

"O no; she is a little tired after the Opera

and a couple of parties, and she is going to Richmond to-day; so she is resting this morning."

"Indeed! very sensible of her. She stayed late at Mrs. Pendarvis's, didn't she?"

"Yes," replied Robert, shortly and uneasily.

Mr. Guyon looked at him, and their eyes met.

"So Frere was there?" said the indomitable Mr. Guyon, as airily and pleasantly as if he were mentioning the most agreeable trifle. "Rather awkward, on the whole; and yet, I don't know—all for the best perhaps. He will probably marry well, and the sooner the better for him and for us."

"For us?" asked Robert timidly. And there was a shade of pain, and something like shame on his face, which would have hurt a sensitive observer, but which merely annoyed Mr. Guyon, who found it difficult to repress a sneer, as he replied:

"And us, of course—that is, if we need care about the matter one way or the other, which I don't see that we need."

"But if Katharine should have any conversation, any confidence with him?" faltered Robert.

"There is not the faintest possibility of any such danger," said Mr. Guyon, with equal composure and decision. "I understand Katharine much better than you do, Robert, and I know that our invulnerable safety"—the younger man flushed and winced a little at the words—"consists in her indomitable pride. The one individual of all her acquaintance who will never exchange a confidential sentence with Katharine is Mr. Gordon Frere." And then Mr. Guyon promptly dropped the subject, and talked of money, racing, betting, and other serious pursuits of life; and after a short time took his leave of Robert, leaving him reassured, but with a fresh and bitter sense of humiliation.

The time which had wrought so rapid a change in Gordon Frere, which had taught him to regard with forgiveness, which almost bordered on approbation, the fickleness and treachery of the woman against whom he had delivered the valedictory philippic, — which Charles Yeldham remembered

with wonder and bewilderment,—had worked considerable alteration in Katharine's mood as well. Her fine nature had been hardened, her generous temper had been warped; a crust of worldliness and selfishness had formed over the hot heart, and the trustful impulses of youth were dead within her; but the maddening anger, the intolerable mortification, had subsided. A momentary thrill of these former emotions, mingled with the yearning of the heart towards the object of a passion, or even a fancy, had passed over her, when, in the crush and whirl of the ball-room, she had recognised Frere. But her strength of will and self-command had effectually put it down before the moment came when she found herself obliged to speak to him.

Something like the tumult of the past renewed itself in her mind when she found herself alone that night, and at liberty to think of the occurrences of that evening; but it did not last. Mr. Guyon was right. Any calculation founded on Katharine's pride could not fail; and that pride helped her in the very first hour of the resuscitation

of the past. Believing as she did that there never had been any sincerity in the sentiment which Gordon Frere had affected towards her, she did not recognise change in the gay and unembarrassed manner which she had immediately observed; she imputed it to the discarding of the mask, the abandonment of the comedy; and so thinking, she wondered that she felt so little anger, so little disdain, so little emotion of any kind, all things considered. She recalled to memory every circumstance of that terrible day which had undeceived her; she recollected it, hour by hour, in its anguish of suspense, in its paroxysms of grief and anger; she remembered the faint deadly sickness which had come over her, and the dreadful despairing hours of the night. But she only remembered these things; she did not feel them again; and Katharine knew that with the last throbs of anger had passed away the last lingerings of her love for Gordon Frere. It had been real, very true, and fervent; and no doubt, had he returned it, as he had taught her to believe he did, it would have lasted through all the chances

and changes of this mortal life; but it was dead and gone now, and the sight of him taught her that it was so. Before Katharine's eyes closed that night, after her long vigil of remembrances and reflections, she knew that she should, in all the future, meet Gordon Frere without any painful emotion, beyond a little irrepressible contempt.

She was soon put to the test; for the acquaintance between Frere and Lady Henmarsh progressed rapidly; and Katharine was not spared the sight or the mention of him. Lady Henmarsh would not have put herself out of her way to annoy Katharine, but she was not unwilling to do so when it happened to come in her way; and she took an early opportunity of confiding to her her impression that Hester Gould was decidedly smitten with the good-looking young fellow, who really had no harm in him, and whose only fault was want of money.

"He is really charming, Kate," Lady Henmarsh observed, with an air of candidly admitting a former error in judgment. "I was quite too hard on him in old times—an age ago—and I am

ready to admit it. Of course *that* would never have done; but every thing is all right now, and I am sure you are the happiest girl in the world; and as for that dear Mr. Streightley, he is a perfect prince."

Katharine had to bear this sort of thing, and she bore it well, wondering sometimes that it did not pain her more keenly. She gave little heed to Lady Henmarsh's hints about Hester Gould, which she imputed to a general impulse of spite; and simply contented herself with smiling rather bitterly as she thought how accurately they would once have hit their mark. When she met Gordon Frere now, there was no glamour between her eyes and him. He was not invested with the golden halo of a girl's fancy. The time which had gone over Katharine's head, though brief in duration, had been long in meaning, and she was no longer the slave of her imagination. She saw him as he really was—a pleasant, kindly, genial, well-bred, well-looking, shallow young man, with brains enough and heart enough for the exigencies of society, and admirably fitted to be rich and idle,

with distinction and popularity. She knew now that he was not a man who would ever accomplish any great or noble purpose in life; not a man on whom a woman's heart could stay itself in trouble. Somehow she felt that she had outgrown and outlived Gordon Frere.

While one woman, to whom he had been the incarnation of the fondest and fairest visions of youth, was thus thinking of Mr. Frere, he had assumed a position of immense importance in the estimation of another—a woman widely different from Katharine in every thing. When Hester Gould met him at Mrs. Pendarvis's ball, she had been attracted towards him chiefly by curiosity. She remembered him well as the fair-haired young man whom she had seen at the memorable promenade, and whom she had immediately discerned to be Katharine Guyon's lover. She strongly suspected that he and the girl had both been victims of some foul play, the full details of which her subsequent acquaintance with the affairs of Mr. Guyon and his son-in-law had not enabled her to ascertain; but that he, at least, had suf-

ferred at Mr. Guyon's unscrupulous hands she did not doubt. Gordon had heard that the "old cat," as he had irreverently called Lady Henmarsh on a former occasion, was "taking a new heiress about with her;" for such was the simple phrase in which the ingenuous youth of his set described Hester's relations with her friend; and when, on his paying his respects to Lady Henmarsh at Mrs. Pendarvis's ball, she had presented him to Miss Gould, he concluded, as he led his partner to the dancing-room, that she was the "new heiress" in question. Thus he too felt some curiosity about the girl, whose tranquil easy manner, keen dark eyes, elegant and tasteful dress, and conversation utterly free from the missishness and the vapidness common to young ladies just "out," made her an interesting person, apart from the very large fortune which she undoubtedly possessed, and which was multiplied by rumour with its accustomed liberality. Gordon would have been considerably astonished, had he known that Miss Gould saw the glance in which his eyes and Katharine's met, and perfectly understood and appreciated the po-

sition ; had he known that she marked the short dialogue which passed between them on the staircase, and noted the coldness and distance of its tone with distinct satisfaction. He and she talked with more animation, and of subjects of more worth and interest, than those usually discussed at a ball ; for even a shallow man like Gordon Frere was forced to think a little when he found himself talking to a woman like Hester Gould ; and they got on together very well indeed ; but the unconscious accord of their thoughts was greater and closer still.

Curiosity, interest, and the spontaneous admiration which he was certain to excite in every woman whom he addressed, had been the first feelings with which Hester Gould had regarded Gordon Frere on that evening. Before she entered the carriage to which he escorted her and Lady Henmarsh, her admiration had increased, her interest had deepened. The calm, well-governed heart, which held itself aloof from passion, and had never loved any living being entirely without calculation and caution, had been sur-

prised, like the weakest, like the least-guarded. Hester Gould had fallen in love—ay, like the veriest sentimental school-girl—at first sight, with Gordon Frere.

She did not deny the fact to herself; she did not deceive herself. It was characteristic of her to be perfectly conscious that she was weak, but not to disguise from herself the weakness. Hester Gould had never been visited by even the most transient feeling to which she could assign the name of love before; and now, when it came, she knew it, she recognised it, she acknowledged it—not with misgiving, not with despair, not with self-contempt. When she was alone that night, or rather in the early summer morning, her ball-dress laid aside, her maid dismissed, she threw open the window of her dressing-room, and sat down where the cool morning air came in and fanned her dark but radiant face. The time wore on, and the sun came out strongly, and the stir of life began, but still Hester sat, gazing out towards the stately leafy trees in Kensington Gardens, and thinking. For the first time in her life she suffered

the tide of strong emotion to sweep over her unchecked; for the first time in her life she felt its fulness. Secretly but desperately she had rebelled against poverty and obscurity; secretly, thirstingly, she had longed for wealth. Poverty and obscurity were things of the past; wealth had come to her, and she had taken it calmly. No human being could ever have guessed at the exultation with which Hester Gould had entered upon the possession of her fortune; no human being could ever have divined the intense secret pleasure which every day's enjoyment of it gave her. But what was it all to this? What was it all to the strange new delight, the sweet subtle hope that stole upon her now? Not until she had thought long, deeply, delightfully, over every little incident of the evening, did Hester's mind revert to Katharine Streightley; and then, so potent was the influence of the spell under which the calm self-possessed woman had fallen, that there was only an acknowledgment of the strangeness of the coincidence; there was not a single thrill of vindictive exultation in the remembrance that they, the

rivals, had changed places; that the man whom Hester told herself she loved, told herself she hoped to win, was the man whom Katharine had loved and lost. All such thoughts seemed infinitely beneath her now, quite lost in the immensity of this new interest in her life; and they could never more have any power over her. But though passion had suddenly invaded the well-guarded territory of Hester Gould's heart, romance had no place in her nature; and she did not for a moment forget or undervalue the advantages of her wealth. "*If* he only comes to love me," she said, "there will be no obstacle. I am rich enough to make it a wise thing for him to marry me." And with this, the last waking thought in her mind, Hester Gould slept, with a smile upon her face which had never before irradiated it.

It was not until they had met several times that Gordon Frere began to think seriously about Hester Gould. He had been asked to two dinner-parties at Lady Henmarsh's, and had been especially distinguished by the gracious attentions of the hostess. On neither occasion had he met

Katharine; but on both Mr. Guyon had been present, and they had got on capitally. The convenient memory and the *savoir vivre* of cousin Ned were displayed to perfection in circumstances of the kind, and Gordon Frere felt quite at his ease. They talked of the Streightleys. Mr. Guyon described Middlemeads; hoped that his young friend would have an opportunity of judging of its beauties for himself; jocularly counselled his young friend to marry, provided he could do it *well*, as soon as possible. "Never too soon, my dear fellow, — never too soon. I was a mere boy myself," said Mr. Guyon, with a comic sort of confidential sentiment; and discovered that he was keeping his young friend away from the ladies.

When Mr. Gordon Frere had been seen a few times riding with Miss Gould in the Row, and had been observed dancing with her an abnormal number of dances, his friends began to make remarks of the kind elegantly called "chaff" on the occurrences. It is not to be supposed, because they have not appeared in these pages, that there were not many aspirants to the hand and fortune of the

shipowner's heiress. Their name, indeed, was legion; but they had all fared equally ill, and not one of the number had any reason to feel himself personally aggrieved by the evident progress of Frere in Miss Gould's good graces. So the chorus was rather congratulatory, the aspirants were good-natured in the main; and though each would have been delighted to secure Miss Gould's fortune for himself, they all agreed that Frere was a good fellow, though an idle dog, who would never make any hand of himself, and it would be a doosid good thing for him. As for Hester, though she made no unfeminine or unladylike advances, she was far too sensible to risk her happiness on punctilio. "I am not the first woman he will have loved, if he ever comes to love me," she thought; "but he is the only man I ever have loved, I ever can love, and that makes all the difference." So she treated him from the first with undisguised though unostentatious preference; and, fully acknowledging to herself that her heart's desire and prayer was to become his wife, never endangered her chance by the slightest coquetry or insincerity.

The light and facile nature of Gordon Frere was exactly calculated to insure the success of such a policy, which, however, was rather the instinct of Hester Gould's good sense. He liked her, he thought her handsome and clever. "Not a star of beauty, not a queen of grace and loveliness, like *her*, you know," said Mr. Frere to a friend of his with whom, in times which seemed very long past now, he had been wont to take counsel, and who listened to him with a gravely-amused expression of countenance and much internal satisfaction—"nothing of that kind, but a real nice girl. As sensible as a judge, sir!—a long way more so than some of them, I believe—and really fond of me. Don't think me a coxcomb, Charley, or an ass, as I was before. This is quite another case; and, by Jove, I am as sure as that I am sitting here in this everlasting old glory-hole, where I don't believe the very dust ever changes or blows away, that if I asked Miss Gould to-morrow to marry me, she would say yes."

"Very good, Gordon," returned his friend.
"Then, if you want her to marry you, and you

are positively sure you would marry her if she hadn't sixpence—which is the extreme proposition you have stated here three times over, and which is one of those things of which no man can be more than comparatively sure—ask her to-morrow, or on the first opportunity, and come and tell me the result. And now I must turn you out. I have an appointment with Claypole in five minutes, and some papers to look over before he comes.”

Mr. Frere went gaily away, and Charles Yeldham did not turn immediately to the papers which lay upon his desk. He walked up and down the room, his hands deep in his pockets, and his head bent. At length he sat down with an impatient sigh and a muttered sentence:

“To think that fourteen months ago he considered himself madly in love with Katharine Guyon! What a blessing it must be to a man to be endowed with the nature of a butterfly!”

Gordon Frere's modest statement of his hopes and expectations was justified by the result; and the flagging spirits of society at the end of the season were raised by learning that a marriage

was "arranged" between Miss Gould, who was of course beautiful and accomplished for the occasion, and Mr. Gordon'Frere, whose ancestral glories and diplomatic connections were also duly paraded.

Katharine had left town some little time before this announcement had supplied a fresh topic for discussion to the few scores of people who knew or felt any curiosity about the respective parties. Her premature abandonment of the delights of London arose from the condition of her husband's health. Robert had been constantly looking, and occasionally complaining of feeling, ill, for several weeks; and at length had acknowledged to his sister that he exceedingly desired the rest and tranquillity of the country.

"I don't think he is so much ill as worried," Ellen had said to her sister-in-law. And the simple girl was right. Robert was worried—worried about money-matters, worried about Mr. Guyon's affairs, and his insatiable, irrepressible scheming. But, worse than all, he was worried by self-reproach.

It was no sacrifice to Katharine to leave town;

but if it had been one, she would not have hesitated to make it. It was therefore at Middlemeads, in the tranquil enjoyment of her beautiful home, invested with all the first golden glory of the autumn, that Katharine learned the news, the great news, which lent eloquence to Ellen Streightley's pen, and caused her to "gush" on paper as she was wont to do in speech. It was not, however, to her ingenuous sister-in-law that Katharine owed her knowledge of the brilliancy of the marriage, the number and importance of the guests, the details of the bride's dress, the high spirits of the bridegroom, the *itinéraire* of the bridal tour, and the winter plans of Mr. and Mrs. Gordon Frere. When the event had taken place, and Lady Henmarsh's occupation as a chaperone was for the second time gone; when she had inspected and sufficiently admired the costly set of rubies which she had received as a parting gift from the heiress, and had declared that she detested weddings, and was tired to death, she could think of no more agreeable way of passing an idle evening than in writing to Mrs. Streightley. Her

letter was very smart, clever, and skilful, as all her letters were ; and if it did not wound Katharine's feelings so much as the writer intended, its failure was to be imputed to a change in her mind and feelings, of which Lady Henmarsh was entirely ignorant.

The engagement had not been a long one ; neither party had had any motive for delay ; but it was by quite an accidental coincidence that Gordon Frere and Hester Gould were married on the anniversary of Katharine Guyon's wedding-day.

CHAPTER IX.

MARRIED TO MONEY.

THE time, so often deferred, at which Mr. Guyon was to pay his first visit to his daughter in her country-house had at length arrived; and the old gentleman made his appearance at Middlemeads with all the advantages of a very juvenile toilet and a new stock of those adjuncts to his personal beauty which he was in the habit of carrying about with him. It was not without reluctance that Mr. Guyon bade adieu to London, which he was accustomed to speak of as "the little village," and its delights; but he felt it absolutely necessary to make himself personally acquainted with that country-house which he had so often depicted to his boon companions in the most glowing terms, and with those country families whom, to the

same confidants, he had represented as revelling in the elegant and unostentatious hospitality of the British merchant. He had been a little chaffed by these friends about the calm manner in which his daughter had borne his long-continued separation from her. Some of them compared him to King Lear, some to Captain Costigan; and Mr. Guyon, who knew very little about either of the historical personages between whom and himself a comparison was instituted, thought it was "dam' low," and that the sooner all chance of a repetition of such joking was put a stop to the better.

So the old gentleman came down to Middlemeads, and took up his quarters in one of the best spare-rooms, and strove to make himself agreeable to other people and to enjoy himself simultaneously. This was not very difficult, for he had a grand capacity for living; and his small-talk and geniality, and stories of grand people, made quite an impression amongst the neighbouring families, who thought Mrs. Streightley rather conceited, and Mr. Streightley very

dull. Mr. Guyon in a very short time had made himself thoroughly at home, and had taken upon himself—not without Katharine's tacit consent; indeed the whole affair rather amused her than otherwise—the direction of affairs at Middlemeads, and the regulation of the manner in which the day should be spent. He it was who organised the *tableaux* to which the whole county was invited, which were such a grand success, and which were commemorated in the *Morning Post*. He it was who arranged for the first meet of the season of the stag-hounds on the Middlemeads lawn, and for the hunt-breakfast at his son-in-law's expense. Robert Streightley was unfortunately compelled to be away in London on business on that interesting occasion; but in his absence Mr. Guyon took the chair, in which he comported himself with the greatest dignity and hospitality; and when the deer was uncartered, waved his hat to the ladies, and rode away after it on one of his son-in-law's horses, to his own intense satisfaction.

Robert Streightley was very frequently com-

pelled to be away in London on business just at that time ; and when he was at home, he seemed to have left his mind behind him among the ledgers and the invoices and the share-lists, and to have left his spirits—God knows where ! He was thoroughly preoccupied and gloomy, never speaking except when spoken to, and then replying with an obvious effort at the collection of his wandering thoughts. Mr. Guyon noticed this immediately after his arrival, and tried to rally his son-in-law, commencing with much pleasant badinage about the accumulation of wealth by the sale of oneself to the Evil One ; an oft-used joke, which he had never known to miss fire hitherto, but which on this occasion was received with perfect silence. Over the quiet dinner, which, as it once or twice happened, Mr. Guyon ate with Katharine and her husband, or in the midst of a large party, it was all the same,—Robert never entered into any thing that was going on, but always remained in the same gloomy, silent, pre-occupied state.

Mr. Guyon could never, even in his most

amiable moods, have been called a patient man, long-suffering was not one of his virtues; and under his son-in-law's long face and absent manner he suffered acutely. His little *mots* passed unsmiled at, his anecdotes of the aristocracy evidently had not been listened to; he felt that he was throwing the pearls of his West-end refinement before City swine; and he was highly indignant. But not with Streightley—or at least he dared not openly declare his indignation to his son-in-law—it was on Katharine that he turned the heavy-guns of his wrath, and rebuked his daughter with an acrimony which might have had serious effect on a less self-possessed young lady.

“I come here,” said Mr. Guyon one morning in the library, where he had gone to write a letter, and where he found Katharine similarly employed,—“I come here to your house, and I find your husband an altered man. He has lost that cheerfulness, that energy, that buoyancy which distinguished him, and, in fact, he's become a doosid unpleasant dreary bird. How's

this? Cheerful before marriage, and miserable after; looks as if marriage was the cause, doesn't it, Kate? And to think that my daughter has not—not striven to—to what d'ye call—bless the lot of the man who—doubles his joys and halves his sorrows, and all that kind of thing? Am I to think that you—but no, that could not be! I must remember—”

“You must remember, papa, if you please,” said Kate, looking him full in the face, and speaking in a low stern voice,—“you must remember the manner in which and the conditions under which I married my husband! And, remembering them, you must be good enough never to dare—it is a strong word to use to one's father, but I repeat it—never to dare to address me in this way again. I know my duty to my husband, and—according to my lights, and under the peculiar circumstances of our union—I do it!”

It was not to be supposed that Katharine, however devoid of that instinctive perception of love which will make the dullest of women quick to

see when trouble is hanging over one dear to her, was either blind or indifferent to the depression of Robert's spirits and the change in his appearance. Towards her, individually, he was always the same,—studious and eager to forward her wishes, and bounding his to making her happy; but he was preoccupied and gloomy. He was beginning to look old, too; the vigorous upright look which had been the first thing in his appearance to strike an observer, was less conspicuous than it had been, and his step was slower and heavier. His wife was not blind to the alteration, and she put it all down to the account of "business." In this general conclusion she was quite right; but Katharine had not the remotest glimmering of a suspicion that misfortune and loss were constituents of this "business." She believed her husband to be a very rich man, whose ambition it was to become very much richer, and whose life was devoted to the realisation of that ambition. She had never ceased to regard him as the "City man" of their first acquaintance; and though her ideas respecting the transactions carried on by

City men had undergone considerable alteration since that time, she was as far as ever from a real comprehension of the risks and the anxieties which her husband's life included. The making of money in larger or smaller sums Katharine understood to be his calling; and so far as the variation was between larger and smaller, she comprehended anxiety being involved; but as to serious loss, as to ruin, she had not the faintest notion of such a possibility. Of Mr. Guyon's transactions with her husband Mrs. Streightley was also profoundly ignorant. Robert had taken care she should be so, for his sake as well as for her own. He knew Katharine's delicacy of feeling and her pride perfectly, and he also appreciated her acuteness and keenness as they deserved. From hurt and indignant mortification at discovering that her father had taken such means to "*exploiter*" her marriage, to questioning why a clever and shrewd man of business, such as Katharine well knew Robert to be, should admit such unscrupulous demands on her father's part, would be an easy and natural transition; and

Robert shrunk with terror from the idea that any such clue should ever find its way to his wife's hands. No symptom of such danger had shown itself; the feelings with which Katharine regarded her father had ceased to be of a kind to prompt her to much personal interest in his affairs, and by nature she was not inquisitive. That Mr. Guyon's pursuits were frivolous in the extreme; that he presented that most contemptible of spectacles—an old man aping the dissolute manners of an objectionable order of youth, Katharine was becoming more and more painfully aware; but she looked no deeper into his life than the surface, from which she turned away with a feeling which, had she investigated it, she must have acknowledged to be contempt.

The nobility of Katharine's nature asserted itself in the manner in which she regarded the marriage of Gordon Frere and Hester Gould. That the intelligence should not cost her a pang of exceeding keenness was impossible; but she did battle with herself against the temptations to bitterness and enmity against Hester which

beset her, and she came nobly out of the strife. Little did she dream how closely her demeanour was scrutinised; little did she imagine that the bright dark eyes of the obsequious Mr. Daniel Thacker, perhaps the humblest of Mrs. Streightley's servants and the most respectful of her admirers, were steadily directed to her face for many days during his stay at Middlemeads, with the purpose of reading what might appear on that fair dial indicative of storm and turmoil in her heart. She had no suspicion that she was watched; but, as she also had nothing whatever to hide, there was no danger in her unconsciousness. The brief sharp pain she endured had come and passed when she was alone. She remembered how she had envied Hester Gould her wealth, only because it left her free to marry as she liked: she remembered her own bitter saying, "she may buy instead of being bought," and she thought it had been strangely realised. But she would not be unjust either to Hester Gould or to her own false lover. She would acknowledge that Hester had many attractions other than her wealth; she

would acknowledge her fair share of beauty, her talents, her good manners, the numerous charms which might easily secure a genuine attachment. She was ready to believe that Gordon Frere might really love Hester; and the more ready, as she had reason to know the shallowness and fickleness of his nature. "I daresay he cares for her as much as he cared for me," Katharine thought; "and in this case he can afford to indulge his fancy,—in mine he could not. She is fortunate that he can love her and marry her, otherwise she too would find that he would love her and leave her, as he left me, to the ridicule of her friends, and a broken heart, were she fool enough to break her heart for him. And he—he has only done exactly what I did, even supposing he does not love her. He has only married for money. With this difference, to be sure,—that I would have shared poverty with him, and he would not face it for me: with this other difference too, that I was in earnest, and he was only amusing himself. Our positions are pretty much the same in the end; we are both rich, we

are parted from each other, and satisfied to be so, and another has the first claim on each. I have no right to despise him for the marriage he has made, nor dares he to despise *me*."

So Katharine wrote to Ellen Streightley, and expressed interest in the marriage, and hope of its happiness, which were perfectly sincere, and were most welcome to the recipient of her letter. She treated the subject with polite indifference in her reply to Lady Henmarsh. She understood cousin Hetty tolerably well, and disdained the spitefulness which she perceived too thoroughly to stoop to retaliation. It was a fortunate circumstance for Robert that his sister had remained with her mother at the Brixton villa after Miss Gould's marriage, and thus no occasion arose for the lengthened and frequent discussion of the event. Had Ellen been at Middlemeads, she would have talked about the wedding to an embarrassing extent. As it was, his reluctance to mention Gordon Frere's name—a reluctance which Katharine did not suspect—was seconded by her own, which Robert's state of mind prevented him from

surmising; and after a mere formal comment, whose insufficiency, considering the intimacy subsisting between the Streightleys and Miss Gould, did not fail to strike Mr. Thacker, the subject was dropped. He tried to talk about the wedding, at which he had been present, and at which his sisters had officiated as bridesmaids; but he had not courage to persevere in the face of Robert's silence and the well-bred coldness of Katharine's manner, which plainly implied that the matter was one wholly devoid of interest to her; but, of course, if Mr. Thacker chose to pursue that topic of conversation, she was bound to listen and to reply.

Life at Middlemeads proceeded much as usual, except that the amusements of autumn were substituted for those of spring. There was no other change in the aspect of affairs at the stately and luxurious country-house, over which Katharine presided with grace and dignity which seemed to grow more and more remarkable. Her beauty was at its zenith now; and no doubt the subsidence of all angry and impetuous feeling, the "settling

down" which had taken place within the past year, had told upon her physically as well as morally. She had not, indeed, acted upon Mrs. Stanbourne's advice in its spirit. She had not faced the fact that the greatest of all her obligations towards her husband was the obligation to love him. She had not tried to realise that; and in so far the change in her was maimed and incomplete. But she had kept the letter of her promise to her friend, and ruled her life with more consideration for her husband than in the earlier days of their marriage. Had there been no obstacle, as unfortunately there was, in the secret bound in Robert's conscience, to a perfect understanding between the husband and wife, it might have come about at this period, when Gordon Frere's marriage had completed the severance of the past from Katharine's present life.

Mrs. Stanbourne was at Middlemeads shortly after the marriage of Gordon and Hester, and had been even more anxious than before to find Katharine on good terms with Robert. She was about to leave England for an indefinite time; and she

would fain have gone away leaving her young kinswoman more intent on happiness, and less intent on pleasure, than she had found her on her first visit to Middlemeads. Observation had but increased her respect and regard for Robert Streightley; and she now noticed his depressed and careworn manner with sincere regret. She was at a loss to what origin to ascribe it; for things were far better, in a domestic point of view, than they had been in the spring. Had Mrs. Stanbourne met Mr. Guyon at Middlemeads, she might have discerned at least a portion of the truth, bringing, as she would have done, clearer notions of "business" than those of Katharine to aid her observations; but that gentleman avoided her with a persistent caution, for which, while far from divining its motives, she was unfeignedly grateful. Mrs. Stanbourne could not have thoroughly understood Mr. Guyon, had she had ever so favourable an opportunity of detecting him; but she despised him intuitively, and had often taken herself to task for the unreasoning dislike with which he inspired her.

“My dear Kate, what quantities of money you spend on furniture!” said Mrs. Stanbourne to Katharine, a day or two before she left Middlemeads. She had entered the morning-room, and found Mrs. Streightley looking over an upholsterer’s pattern-book; while a “young man” stood by, awaiting her decision and her orders. She had given them, and the young man had taken his departure, charged by Katharine to have certain articles ready for her inspection by a certain day of the ensuing week.

“Do I?” asked Katharine absently. “Well, perhaps I do; but I did not choose the things here myself, you know; and then, I like change.”

“May I ask what you are changing now, Kate?”

“O dear, yes, of course. It’s my dressing-room furniture. I hate that walnut-wood, it looks so brittle; and I was quite delighted with Lady Kilmantan’s rooms; so I am going to have just the same. They will be charming, with a conservatory and an aviary thrown out on the western side—just the aspect, you know.”

"But your present conservatory is a splendid one, Kate, to say nothing of your acre of glass at the gardens."

"But I don't care for that great show thing; I want one of my own, that no one can go into except I specially invite them, and where I can choose the flowers myself, and put common flowers in if I please, and not be dictated to by the gardeners. See, here are the plans; charming, are they not? Here's to be a delicious little fountain, and the floor is to be white marble."

"Very pretty, Kate; but also very expensive. Don't think me intrusive, dear, or impertinent, if I say again I think you spend a very great deal of money. Mr. Streightley is very rich, I believe; do you know how rich?"

"N-not exactly," said Kate hesitatingly. "I know nothing about his income, except that he tells me to do just as I like. People talk of him to me as a 'City magnate,' and as if there were no end to his money."

"Have you any idea how much you spend yourself, Kate, in a year?"

"No, I have not. Every thing of this kind"—and she waved her hand, to indicate the room in which they were sitting, with its luxurious appointments—"Mr. Streightley arranges for. I have nothing to do with money except for my private expenses, dress, and that; and I have not had any bills yet."

"I fancy they will surprise you when they arrive, Kate. But if Mr. Streightley has said nothing, I am perhaps taking fright unnecessarily." And then Mrs. Stanbourne rather abruptly turned the conversation to her approaching departure from England. She was to winter at Rome with her daughter and her son-in-law; and she and Katharine indulged in talking about a proposed plan for the Streightleys joining the party there. It did very well to talk about, if nothing more came of it; and the vague prospect softened the pain with which Katharine bade her friend adieu a few days later.

The alterations at Middlemeads went on briskly, and, like all alterations, exhibited a tendency to extend their scope and increase their variety. The dull wintry weather had come now, and the com-

fort of the luxurious house was somewhat interfered with by the presence of workmen and the disarrangement of some of the rooms. Under a momentary impression created by what Mrs. Stanbourne had said, Katharine had spoken to her husband about the cost of her intended improvements, which had now extended far beyond the narrow sphere of her own apartments. It was the first time the subject of money had been mooted between them; and Katharine's manner was slightly constrained, her pride slightly touched. She shrank from the least possibility of a rebuke, from the shade of an imputation that she had interpreted the *carte-blanche* which her husband had given her too liberally. A different and more painful kind of embarrassment possessed Robert; and his over-eagerness to hide it from his wife, his stern resolution to carry out to the letter the tacit contract between them, induced him to reassure her with so much vehemence, that Katharine never gave the subject another thought, but plunged into her plans with fresh vigour and heedless extravagance.

Mrs. Streightley found the distance from London inconvenient, when each day required her to pronounce a judgment upon some new pattern in furniture or hangings, or to decide for or against some piece of *virtù* or ornament of a rare and costly description. The season was dull down in Buckinghamshire; and though London was in a certain sense, the fashionable one, dull also, it would at least offer that dear delight to all who lead such lives as hers—a change. So she assented very gladly to a proposition which Robert made to her at the beginning of November, that they should remove to the house in Portland Place for a month. The reason he assigned for this arrangement, on his own part, was the plea of “business,” which Katharine never inquired into; and in a few days, with the ease and celerity with which rich people make even the most out-of-the-way arrangements, Katharine found herself settled in her town-house, if not with all the luxury and completeness of “the season,” in very perfect comfort. She had not thought it necessary to apprise Mr. Guyon of her intention of coming up to town; nor did she

let him know immediately that she had done so. On the second afternoon after her arrival in London she called at his house, but without any expectation of finding him at home. She was, however, shown into the dingy dining-room—more dingy than ever; and there her father joined her after a few minutes. He expressed all the fit and appropriate sentiments on beholding her, with his usual fluency; but he did not express surprise quite successfully. This did not strike Katharine at the time; but as she drove back to Portland Place, having invited her father to dinner on the following day, she thought of it, and felt sure that he had not been surprised,—in fact, that he knew she was in town.

“How very odd!” she thought; “has Robert been to see him? And if he has, why should papa not have mentioned it, and said at once he had been expecting to see me?”

“I called on papa this afternoon,” she said to her husband that day at dinner, at which meal she could not help observing Robert’s unusual gloom and thoughtfulness. “He is coming to

dine with us to-morrow. Have you seen him yet?"

"Yes," said Robert; "he came to the office yesterday."

Some feeling like anger, but which she could not precisely define, caused Katharine to turn red and hot for a moment. Her husband said no more, and seemed lost in thought. Had their mistress chanced to look towards them, she would have seen a very expressive glance exchanged between the servants in attendance. The "situation" was not quite a mystery for the servants' hall, and the opinion there for some time had been that "the old 'un was a-comin' of it a deal too strong, and he'd find Streightley wouldn't stand it much longer."

Katharine felt uncomfortable, she did not know why; and she watched her father on the following day with a degree of attention she had seldom bestowed upon him of late. His manner was as jaunty, his conversation was as fluent, his juvenility was as marked, as well-preserved, as ever. He was delightfully facetious; and when he

told Katharine that he had all sorts of messages in charge for her from Cousin Hetty, and that—gad! he had nearly forgotten the chief news of all—sentence of death against Sir Timothy; couldn't live a month, the doctors said; and as they had the power of proving the soundness of their own judgment, of course he wouldn't live a month,—he made the little joke quite fascinating. Still there was something about him, and about Robert, who was a poor dissembler, which Katharine did not like, did not understand, and which made her uncomfortable. There was a fourth person present; a circumstance which each felt to be a relief. This was Ellen Streightley. Katharine had gone that afternoon to the Brixton villa, and had paid Robert's mother a visit, during which she had been as charming and agreeable as she could be when she chose. She had brought Ellen home with her; and an instinct now made her doubly glad she had done so. Robert had thanked her warmly and gratefully for her prompt attention to his mother and to Ellen, and had looked as happy as ever for a little. Somehow Katharine liked his

thanks, liked his kind words; and when she wondered what was amiss, found herself hoping it was nothing involving any distress of mind to Robert.

Mr. Guyon went away early, having told his daughter he should come to breakfast on the morrow. "But I daresay I shall not see you, my dear," he added; "for Robert and I have business to talk over, and we mean to shut you out,—don't we, Robert?" And the affectionate father-in-law nodded in his most airy and jovial way to Mr. Streightley. But Robert only bowed. He was immovably grave, and Katharine almost made up her mind that she would ask him what was the cause of his restraint and gloom. She never did ask the question, however; for the following day found her full of all the delightful occupations which she had planned for herself in town—found her bent on enjoying all that London had to offer during its partial eclipse, and also found her father and Robert apparently on as good terms as ever. Robert had noticed his wife's transient uneasiness, and, determined to

adhere to his fatal resolution of concealment, he had applied himself to the task of hiding the truth, this time with success.

CHAPTER X.

STAKED.

THE pallid footman, who still remained in attendance on Mr. Guyon in Queen Anne Street, had been of late leading such an easy life—had had so much time for the enjoyment of social carouses at his club, for the cultivation of female society, for the promotion of the growth of his whiskers, and other large-souled pursuits—had, above all, been enabled to indulge in his favourite luxury of lying in bed late o' mornings to such an extent since his young mistress's marriage, that he received his master's announcement that breakfast for two must be ready at nine o'clock the next morning with disgust which he felt it difficult to restrain. As, however, he knew from experience that Mr. Guyon possessed a temper which he never gave himself the trouble of placing

under much restraint, and which had hitherto vented itself in strange but particularly strong oaths, and which, as the pallid domestic feared, had a strong leaning towards the use of sticks and horsewhips, he thought it better to say nothing, and took care that the meal was ready at the appointed time.

At the appointed time Mr. Guyon entered the dining-room, seized the newspaper, and turned hurriedly to a particular spot in its columns, laid the sheet down again with a reassured air, glanced through his letters, and then, leaning his elbows on the mantelshelf, carelessly glanced at himself in the glass. The careless glance became more attentive, more strained, and more fixed, as he noticed a curious odd expression of puffiness round his eyes, a tightness across his forehead, a full, heavy, bloodshot look in the eyeballs, and a sallow bloated look generally. He had had a strange singing in his head the last few days, a sense of fullness and dizziness, a disagreeable notion of black specks flashing before his eyes; and as he regarded his altered appearance in the

glass, he remembered these various ailments, and shook his head gravely. "This won't do, Ned!" he soliloquised, leaning his chin on his hand, and looking at his reflected image; "this *won't* do! You've gone to grief most infernally within the last few months, and you're showing signs of shutting up. You can't carry on at the pace, Ned! It's all very well for the young fellows with whom you've been living; they're fresh and strong, and can stand any thing; but you're a doosid old bird, Ned, and you're getting stiff and cranky, and all this night-work plays the devil with you! You must cut it," continued Mr. Guyon, tweaking a gray hair out of his whiskers; "you must cut it, and lie fallow for a bit. If this thing only pulls through to-day," he said after a pause, "I'll drop the whole lot, and go off quietly to some German baths, and simmer and stew and drink the waters, and come back a new man. If it comes off! phew!" and here Mr. Guyon ran his hand through his hair. "Well, if it does not, I shall go abroad all the same, and try the sea-breezes of Boulogne."

Whether the mention of such an excursion had a singular effect on him, or whether he was really in a bad state of health, it is certain that Mr. Guyon felt so flushed and strangled at this moment that he reeled to a chair, and undid his very elaborate blue bird's-eye cravat, and loosened his shirt-collar, and sat puffing and panting for a few minutes, when he rang the bell, and ordered the pallid footman to bring him some brandy and soda-water. He had taken a few sips of this beverage, and was beginning to feel a little more himself, when a phaeton drawn by a splendid pair of chestnuts came dashing up the street, and stopped at Mr. Guyon's door. The natty groom sprung to the horses' heads; the gentleman who had been driving descended, and gave a tremendous rap; and presently the pallid footman announced "Mr. Stallbrass!"

Mr. Stallbrass, of Wood Street, Cheapside, and the Willows, Tulse Hill, was, at the former address, a Manchester warehouseman in a very large way of business; at the latter, a fine old English gentleman of large means and decidedly

sporting tendencies. Cramped in early youth by the objectionable attentions of a father of commercial habits and evangelical tendencies; married when very young to the daughter of his objectionable father's senior partner, a pale little woman with drab hair and a weak spine; condemned thus to lead his City life amidst long flat pasteboard boxes, and his home life amidst short round Claphamite divines, Mr. Stallbrass—thanks to his glorious constitution—had had the good fortune to outlive both his father and his wife, to inherit both their fortunes, and to be able to indulge his peculiar tastes in the freest and the easiest manner. Although he still was “the firm” in Wood Street, he attended to business but rarely. How could he, indeed, when he never was absent from any of the great race-meetings in the summer, from any steeplechase or “pugilistic revival” in the winter? To know sporting-men of all kinds, from the highest to the lowest; to call them by their Christian or nick-names; to get the office on all sporting events; have his name mentioned in *Bell* as “that real Corinthian,” or as “amongst the *élite* present

we observed—;” to have the red-jacketed touts touch their hats to him,—these were the delights of life which Mr. Stallbrass coveted, and which he *now* enjoyed. He had made Mr. Guyon’s acquaintance in some fast society, and had been greatly impressed by the old gentleman’s manners and tone, which he afterwards affirmed to be “the real thing, and no flies;” and he determined to cultivate his acquaintance, though he saw at a glance all the flaws of his character. For Mr. Stallbrass was, as he himself expressed it, “a long way off a fool,” and saw in an instant that any intimacy between him and Guyon could only be carried on by his opening his purse-strings, and consenting to pay, as Telemachus usually pays, for Mentor’s countenance and counsel. But in this case Telemachus, though not a youth, was decidedly an aspiring man, aspiring to be one of a good set, and hitherto he had soared no higher than the outside ring of the fast stockbrokers. Old Guyon undoubtedly went into good society of its kind, and could, if he chose, pull Stallbrass up with him. So Stallbrass’s house, horses, traps,

and hospitality, were very much at Mr. Guyon's service; and there was only one thing appertaining to Mr. Stallbrass which the old campaigner was warned off, and that was Mr. Stallbrass's purse: Of course old Guyon had made the assault in that quarter at a very early period of their acquaintance, but had been met with such a straightforward rebuff, delivered without the slightest possibility of being misunderstood, that he had from that time contented himself with his right of "free warren" over the appanages above mentioned, and never renewed the attempt.

But in every other way Mr. Stallbrass surrendered to the superior abilities, and bowed down before the more exalted position, of his friend. See him now as he comes into the room—a tall, big, burly man, with a heavy grizzled beard and moustache, light-drab overcoat, cut-away undercoat, blue bird's-eye cravat with a big dog's-tooth set in gold for a pin, long waistcoat, horsey tight trousers, and gaiter-boots. Mr. Stallbrass has a big white hand, on the little finger of which he wears a big horseshoe ring;

a keen sunken eye, a pair of bushy brows, a swaggering gait, and a loud strident voice. In Mr. Guyon's house, in Mr. Guyon's company, the swagger is left out of the gait, and the tones of the voice are modulated. "Chesterfield"—that is the playful name by which Mr. Stallbrass passes amongst his friends on the Stock Exchange—"Chesterfield," they say, "tears and ramps awfully this side Temple Bar; but old Guyon could drive him in a basket fourwheeler!"

Mr. Stallbrass, following close upon the announcement of the pallid footman, found Mr. Guyon finishing the soda-water and brandy, and stopped in the doorway, shaking his uplifted forefinger.

"Hallo, my noble Captain! Comed and cotched you in the werry act, as the man says, did I? That won't do, Major—that tells all sorts of stories of last night's hanky-panky, that does!"

"Ah, Stallbrass, my good fellow!" said Mr. Guyon, wiping his lips and rising much refreshed, but still rather tottery; "glad to see you, doosid

glad. You're punctual as to — as to — you know!"

"I know! Lord bless you, I *always* know, as the man says. We're goin' to have a fine day after all."

"I hope so; it looks like it. Make all the difference to us, eh?"

"Well, yes. If there ~~was~~ was to be much more mud, it would tell against Devilskin, it would! He's a light 'oss, you know, though a rare plucked 'un; but mud's the devil. Get into one of those sticky quagmires, and where are you? as the man says."

"Did you hear any thing after I left last night?"

"Yes. The Marquis came up to Jack Green's — you know old Jack Green? — and an out-and-out tout the Marquis is! He'd seen Devilskin that morning, and says he's first-rate, head and tail up, fit to jump a town! The Marquis — you know why he's called the Marquis — no? Why, because he was cab-boy to Lord Waterford in the old days — the Marquis saw Griffin, who's going to ride Devilskin to-day, and he's put the pot on

so far as he can go, and says there's nothing to touch him in the lot."

"I see Devilskin holds his place in the betting."

"Yes. Vixen came with a rush yesterday afternoon, I understand; but her temper's so awful, her people never know what she's going to do. That's good for our side, as the man says; and besides, she can't hold a candle to the black horse—if he's meant."

"*If* he's meant! Why, good Lord! there can't be a doubt about that."

"There's *always* a doubt about any turf event, my noble Captain; and these Davidsons, who own Devilskin, are reg'lar legs, you know—legs, as the man says! But Griffin swears he means to ride on the square, and—what's the matter with you now?"

"Nothing, my dear boy, nothing. I've been a little queer these last few days, that's all. I—I suppose you've not hedged?"

"Not a penny! My book ain't so heavy as yours; at least so I gathered from what they said

at Pommeroy's last night. You must have done a heavy lot, you must; but you West-end swells can stand it, — that's one thing, as the man says."

"If the man said that," said Mr. Guyon with a very ghastly smile, "he talked about what he knew nothing of. However, let's have breakfast now, and then get down to Croydon."

The breakfast, an elaborate one of the heavy sporting order—many kidneys, large chops, ham and eggs—was done ample justice to by Mr. Stallbrass, whose digestive powers were never out of order; while Mr. Guyon merely picked at a sardine with a shaking hand, and drank tea feverishly. In the course of the meal Mr. Stallbrass said—

"Saw Bob Streightley going to the Great Western as I drove through. Going down to his place in Bucks, I suppose; and going early, as if it was to his business. He is a rum 'un—as Jack Green says, 'The early bird's worth two worms in the bush.' He don't look well, don't Bob Streightley, though; pale in

the gills, and seems to me to have aged a good deal."

"The anxieties of a gigantic business, my dear Stallbrass—"

"Yes, a little too gigantic if he doesn't look out; and likely to be a good deal less before he's done with it!"

"What do you mean by that? you're so infernally enigmatical, my good fellow," said old Guyon with great irritability, "that, damme, one might as well talk to the—the riddle Egyptian thing."

"O, I'm sorry I spoke—never holler! as old Jack Green says," replied Mr. Stallbrass, who was easily offended. "I'll be as mum as the dumb cove at Manchester for the rest of the day."

"What a doosid provokin' fellow you are!" screamed Mr. Guyon in a fresh access of petulance. "Didn't you understand that I asked you to speak, and not be silent? What was that you were saying about Streightley?"

"It's not what I say, but what every body—old Jack Green and the rest of 'em, are saying—

that he's going too much a-head; that he was hard hit by that bank smash; that instead of pulling up, he went a-head after that; and that he must look out!"

Whether the information thus conveyed was new to Mr. Guyon or not, could not have been guessed by the expression of his features. A twitch passed across his face; but when he spoke his looks expressed scorn rather than astonishment, and he said, "Parcel of dam' cackling fellows; let 'em leave Streightley alone. He'll be a merchant-prince when they've returned to their native gutters, by Jove!" The old gentleman braved it out nobly; but it was only by a strong effort, for his heart sunk within him, and he felt a presentiment of impending evil.

After breakfast Mr. Stallbrass lighted a very big cigar, and, as a thin soft rain was beginning to fall, put on a very big driving-coat, with double-sewn seams, which asserted themselves in a very prominent manner, with innumerable pockets, which either gaped wide-open or hid themselves under pent-house ledges, and with a large collar,

which, when raised, took in all Mr. Stallbrass's beard and a huge portion of his face. Mr. Guyon having also muffled himself up to the best of his ability, they climbed into the mail phaeton, and started; Mr. Stallbrass driving his splendid pair in excellent style, cutting in and out in the most workmanlike manner, and eliciting great admiration from the cabmen and boys. Before they had gone very far the rain ceased, and Mr. Guyon began to feel the reviving influence of the fresh air, which, with some new information about Devilskin which he received from a mysterious and shabby man, who stopped their phaeton at the foot of Westminster Bridge, made the old gentleman perk up again, and talk in his usual frivolous rattle to his companion, though that strange, puffed, bloated look had not faded out of his face.

Mr. Stallbrass was not given to conversation when he was driving, his attention being almost entirely occupied with his horses, which he had brought to a great state of perfection and simultaneous stepping; so that, with the exception of pointing with his whip to one or two houses where

“old Jack Green” had either lived, or had known some one who had lived there, which gave the place quite an interest in Mr. Stallbrass’s eyes, he was silent during the drive, and his companion was left to his own reflections. And these were not of a particularly pleasant kind. Mr. Guyon had backed the favourite for the steeplechase now about to be decided, to a far greater extent than any one, even his sporting friend beside him, knew of; and until that present moment had never seriously attempted to realise his position in case his horse should be beaten. Floating through life in his usual airy manner, with good clothes on his back and a few pounds in his pocket, which prevented him feeling the pressure of any immediate necessity, “handsome Ned Guyon” closed his eyes to disagreeable objects in his old age as readily as he had done in his youth, and sturdily refused to look at the shadows of any coming events. Should his horse win—and he must, damme, he must—Mr. Guyon would, on the settling-day, come into possession of what he termed “a hatful” of money; enough to pay off all his

most pressing creditors, without the necessity of seeking aid from Streightley, whose stern face was like a very baleful vision before his father-in-law's imagination. And if the horse were beaten—the old gentleman took off his hat and wiped his brow, on which great beads of sweat had burst out at the mere supposition—well, if the horse were beaten, he should quietly drop across to Boulogne, and stay there until matters were blown over. Katharine would send him pocket-money, and that sort of thing; and there was life in the old dog yet, and, damme, they should see he wasn't beaten.

Such was the tenor of Mr. Guyon's concluding reflections as Mr. Stallbrass turned the spanking chestnuts, who had spanked so much all the way from town as to be covered with foam and lather, into the muddy lane leading to the race-ground, which was already lined on either side with crowds of countrymen and village loafers, gathered together to gape and chaff in that blunder-headed manner so pleasant to the English rustic. There were plenty of drags both before and behind

them, and Mr. Stallbrass—who affected the coachman whenever he had the reins in his hand—was perpetually jerking his little finger into the air, or waving his whip in answer to recognitions, feeling all the time thoroughly happy at being seen in the company of such an unmistakable and well-known “West-end nob” as Mr. Guyon. Paying the entrance-fee, they turned up through a gate on to the turf; no sooner had they reached which than Mr. Stallbrass had a new excitement, and a new triumph, for the Hon. William Trafford, known as “Tit Trafford” from his love of horse-flesh, ranging up alongside in his drag, and knowing both Guyon and Stallbrass, proposed to the latter to “have a spurt;” and away went Tit Trafford’s four bays and Stallbrass’s chestnut pair careering off in a race in which the latter had by no means the worst of it. Mr. Guyon disapproved of this proceeding, which caused him to clutch wildly at different portions of the phaeton, and shook and bumped him woefully,—disapproved of it so much that he pronounced it “infernally stoopid,” and only fit to have been the act of a

“dam schoolboy.” It was not until they had secured a good place in the rank, horses had been removed, and a capital lunch spread, that the old gentleman recovered his equanimity.

But long before luncheon, in fact within a minute of the phaeton’s stopping, Mr. Guyon had descended into the ring and learned the latest odds about Devilskin. There, in the bawling, fighting, seething, jostling crowd, he made his way, listening to scraps of information given to him now and then by men who muttered mysteriously behind their betting-books, or took off their hats to whisper behind them into Mr. Guyon’s ear. It was all right,—nothing to touch him; fit to run for a man’s life, Sir Harvey had said that very morning. O, here was Sir Harvey. “Ah, my dear Sir Harvey, one word—only one!” and Mr. Guyon laid his trembling hand on the arm of a big stalwart Yorkshire squire, Sir Harvey Boyce, one of the keenest patrons of the turf, and owner of Devilskin. The two men stood aside for a moment, and Guyon said—

“About the horse? He’s right?”

"Right as the mail."

"And—and—he's meant?"

"Meant? d—n it, Guyon—"

"O, don't blaze out at me, Sir Harvey; don't be in a rage. If you knew how heavily I stand on this race! Ever since you put me on in the autumn I've been backing the horse, long odds and short odds; I've not got off a penny, and—" he stopped for breath, and the big burly Yorkshireman, looking at him and noticing how ill he appeared to be, and how the wrinkled hand clasping his arm shook and trembled, said kindly—

"Keep your pecker up, Guyon! I've stood all my money on the horse, and I know there's nothing to beat him in the field."

So, comforted and pleased with this interview, Mr. Guyon made his way back to the phaeton, where Mr. Stallbrass's grooms had already unfastened the hampers and spread the lunch, and where Mr. Stallbrass had now gathered round him two or three men "of the right sort," who were drinking sparkling Moselle, and wondering "what had become of old Guyon."

The luncheon and the wine had a still further revivifying effect on that gentleman's spirits; and feeling justly that he was regarded by Mr. Stallbrass and his friends in the "cock-of-the-walk" capacity, he sought to be particularly agreeable, and, having quite a new audience, told some of his best stories — accommodating the principal characters therein with titles freely distributed — with very great success. There were two races before the great event of the day, but they attracted little attention; the first came off while the gentlemen were at luncheon, and they walked down to look at the jumps, while the course was being cleared for the second.

They turned down from the starting-place, and looked first at a low gap, then at two or three flights of turf-covered hurdles, at all of which Sir Harvey Boyce laughed contemptuously, and declared that any donkey could clear them; then they struck across a corner of the field, and came upon a clean ditch with a high bank on its further side, separating a ploughed field from a bit of turnips. The ditch was rather broad, and the

bank was high and slippery; then came grass with more hurdles, then grass again, and then just before turning into the straight run home, a stiff post and rail, old, worn, and mended here and there in places with rough stakes and railings, with a drop of six or seven feet into the course below. All the gentlemen regarded this with great curiosity, and Sir Harvey Boyce said, "This is what'll try 'em! There are seven of 'em to start, and except Vixen and Devilskin, all the rest know nothing but flat racin', and have just been taught jumpin' enough to clear those hurdles. But they'll be bumped before they come to this, and nothing's over here but the chestnut mare and my horse, I'll take my oath!" Then they returned to the stand on their carriages, and shortly afterwards the second bell rang and the great race commenced.

There were seven starters, and the race was twice round the course. They got away all together, through the gap and over the first flight of hurdles all in line; a little scattering of them in the ploughed field, where the first symptoms

of tailing-off began to be manifested ; then came the ditch and bank, where there were three dead refusals, the four safely on the other side being Devilskin, Vixen, a mare called Gray Duchess—whose performances were all unknown, and who belonged to a sporting saddler—and Billy Button, an old steeple-chaser, entered to make running for Vixen. Through the grass they came, Vixen and Devilskin leaving the others about a couple of lengths behind, over the light hurdles, then straight heading up for the drop fence. A crowd had gathered at this point to see the jump taken ; and as the horses came up, each thundered out the name of his favourite. With his face dead set, his teeth clinched, and with every muscle of his limbs like steel, Griffin brought his horse straight at the jump, and Devilskin scarcely needing the slightest lifting, cleared it in one great rushing bound, blundered a little on touching the ground, but was up and away ere any of the others were over. Vixen came next, fretting and fuming, her foam-flecked chestnut coat heat-stained and mud-dabbled ; her jock, who evidently knew her temper,

riding her with a light yet firm hand, and never touching her until she was just preparing to take her spring, when he rammed the spurs home, and brought her over cleverly and safely. Close upon her followed the saddler's gray mare, heavily built and somewhat clumsy in her gallop as she came thundering along, but rising at the jump and skimming it like a bird. It was the prettiest thing that had been seen that day; the people cheered till they were hoarse; and Sir Harvey Boyce turned a trifle pale as he whispered to Tit Trafford that "that was an Irish mare, he'd take his oath, and that he was d—d if he liked her looks." Now past the stand all, Devilskin leading, but Vixen close upon him, and away into the open, Gray Duchess following three lengths behind. Now all excitement, hoarse roar, and wild clamour, for Vixen and Devilskin were neck and neck, over the light hurdles, through the ploughed field, and nearing the high bank. Griffin seems to feel that Devilskin wants a lift here, gathers his horse well up in hand, and comes down heavily on his quarters as he rises to the leap. Cleverly

done, Griffin, for Devilskin clears it better than he did the first round. Not so Vixen, also whipped, who rears, boggles, tumbles, and rolls. Devilskin wins! Devilskin! Devilskin! Up goes the clamour from a thousand hoarse-throats. What is that cry? The Gray! the Gray! Gray Duchess slips over the high bank like a mist, like a dream, collars Devilskin in the grass, and side by side with him clears the last set of light hurdles, and rounds the corner facing the drop fence. Now, Griffin, for your life! bring all the knowledge, all the pluck learned and nurtured in far-away Yorkshire spinneys to this one test—you have a foeman worthy of your steel-spurs; show that you know yet a better thing than he, and win the race! Up came the horse, blown, panting, with red eyeballs, drooping crest: in the hollow it looked as if it were all over, but Griffin steadied him quietly, and then brought him at the leap with a rush. One tremendous welt he gave him, one home-dig with the spurs, and Devilskin rose at the post and rails,—rose to fall helplessly into the midst of them staked and dying;

while, so close as almost to brush his writhing carcass Gray Duchess slips by, and gallops in the winner and sole survivor of the fray.

Mr. Stallbrass closed his race-glass, muttered a strong word, and turned to speak to his friend ; but as he turned he felt a heavy weight on his shoulder, and heard the words " Ruined—ruined, by God !" muttered in his ear. The next moment Mr. Guyon was lying on his back at the bottom of the phaeton, livid in the face, and breathing stertorously. An alarm was raised, and a mounted gentleman, announcing himself to be a doctor, rode up to the phaeton, threw himself from his horse, and after a hasty examination, pronounced Mr. Guyon to be in an apoplectic fit, and shook his head very dubiously as to the result.

CHAPTER XI.

“IN THE DEAD UNHAPPY NIGHT.”

THE first confusion and alarm which had ensued on Mr. Guyon's sudden illness had subsided, and had been succeeded by the orderly hush of a house in which mortal sickness had assumed its irresistible sway. Mr. Guyon had been carried upstairs to the large bedroom formerly occupied by Katharine, and which he had used since his daughter's marriage. The doctor who had been found and brought to his assistance upon the race-course, and his own physician, for whom the housekeeper had sent at once, before she had despatched the footman to carry the evil tidings to Mrs. Streightley, were busily but silently occupied with the insensible form. The servants, frightened and helpless as servants generally are, were standing about on the stairs and landing-place, ready to

obey such orders as were transmitted to them from time to time from the grave gentleman in that awful room, through the medium of the housekeeper. They whispered together solemnly at intervals, and started when the door on which all their attention was fixed opened a little, and Mrs. Clarke beckoned one of the two women towards her. Mr. Stallbrass was in the dingy dining-room, awaiting the award of the solemn tribunal upstairs. He was a kind-hearted fellow enough; and having done so much, "having picked up the poor old boy," he thought, "I may as well see it out." Mrs. Clarke had entreated him to remain—her master's daughter, she said, would be here immediately, and she would want to hear how it happened. So this modern type of Good Samaritan, useful but not officious, and rather sheepish about his good nature, stayed. The rain, which had begun to fall just as they were getting Mr. Guyon away from the race-course, was now falling in cold, pitiless, ceaseless streams, and the early darkness of a winter's evening had added its gloom to the scene. The

gas had been lighted in the dining-room of Mr. Guyon's house, but the window-shutters were unclosed, and Stallbrass walked disconsolately up and down from the door to the window, stopping each time as he reached the latter boundary to look out into the damp dreariness of the street. His spirits were beginning to flag under the monotony of this occupation, and he was seeking relief by furtive snatches of reading—odd paragraphs in the *Field* for last week, and little bits of the current *Punch*—when Mrs. Clarke came in, looking very pale and scared.

"Well," said Stallbrass abruptly, but kindly, "what news is there? Has the lady come? She can't have come, though, or I should have seen her."

"No, sir, she has not come; and I dread she won't while the breath is in her father, which it's all it is, as far as I can understand the doctors."

"Really! I'm very sorry—poor old gentleman! Has he not recovered consciousness at all, then?"

"No, sir, not a bit—he has groaned a few

times, and then they thought he were coming to, but he didn't—but there, sir, there's a carriage—there's Mrs. Streightley—” And the housekeeper ran excitedly out, followed by Mr. Stallbrass, and threw open the door, through which a gust of wind and a cold dash of rain drove into the hall.

Stallbrass saw a tall young lady, whose face, pale and agitated, struck him even then as being one of the most beautiful he had ever seen,—who passed into the room he had just left, followed by the housekeeper. He stood in the hall, the noise of wind and rain outside mingling with the stamping of the horses, the jingling of their harness, and the sound of the women's voices.

“What is all this, Clarke? is it true?” asked Katharine, as she hurriedly untied her bonnet and flung it down, and threw off her pelisse of velvet and fur.

“Yes, ma'am, it's all true. But O, why did you not come sooner? James has been more than an hour gone to fetch you.”

“I was out—they had to find me,” she said, in the same hurried tone. “What do they say

it is? Let me see the doctor. Let me go up stairs."

"Yes, ma'am, directly," said Mrs. Clarke, down whose rosy and unrefined cheeks tears were beginning to flow. "But first you must see the gentleman that brought him home; he knows all about it; he breakfasted with master this morning. If you please, sir,—Lord ha' mercy, if he hasn't been left out in the hall!"

Katharine stepped hastily towards the door, as Mrs. Clarke, with many voluble apologies, brought Mr. Stallbrass in. She thanked him briefly, and entreated him to tell her all that had happened. She listened to his story with painful eagerness, turning paler and paler as he went on; and when she had heard it all, she thanked him again.

"And now I must go to him," she said, and held out her hand to the stranger.

"I will wait a little longer, if you will allow me, for the chance of a more favourable report," he said.

"Do so," she returned. "My carriage is at your disposal. Tell them to come back here,

Clarke, when they have taken this gentleman home." Then she again bade him farewell and left him.

He walked up and down the room for half an hour, at the end of which time the housekeeper came downstairs again;—this time crying unrestrainedly.

"There's not a bit of hope, sir; but they think he will live for some hours; and they hope he will get his senses back, and speak to his daughter, or at least look at her before he dies."

"I hope so, I am sure," said Mr. Stallbrass solemnly.

"I was to ask your name, if you please, sir," said Mrs. Clarke with some hesitation.

"Certainly; there is my card," and he laid one on the table. "I shall call in the morning." Then he took up his hat and went away, having declined the offer of the carriage. Mrs. Clarke ordered the coachman to return to Portland Place, adding that his mistress would remain with her father. "I wonder your master hasn't been here afore this," said the housekeeper in conclusion.

“Master’s out of town; worse luck!” was the sympathetic answer of the footman, as he jumped up beside the coachman, and they drove off.

Mrs. Clarke went slowly up the long staircase to the room about which such awful suspense and interest gathered, unmindful of the card which lay upon the table in the dining-room, and was swept away with other rubbish afterwards and forgotten; and when she stood beside Katharine by the dying man’s bedside, all remembrance of the stranger had faded out of the minds of both.

The dying man! Yes, the fiat had gone forth—he was dying. Ned Guyon, the *ci-devant jeune homme par excellence*, the trifler by vocation and profession, the man of all others with whom it was impossible to associate an idea of solemnity, the dandy in dress, the *roué* in morals, the *persifleur* in religion, the man in consideration of whom it would have been particularly pleasant to disembarass the mind of belief in present and future accountability,—this man was dying. Not slowly, with time and opportunity for reflection, for repentance, for “setting his house in order;” but

quickly, dumbly, as a stricken animal might die—as men die in whom the brain is killed first, and the machine has but a little while to labour on afterwards. His daughter saw it all, realised it all in a minute, even as she crossed the threshold of the room she had never entered since her wedding-day; and there mingled with the horror and anguish of the moment a sudden sense of recognition, and yet of strangeness, as she saw, without looking at them, in the inexplicable vividness of perception which comes in moments of strong emotion, the “soulless things” she had lived amongst for so long in the old life gone for ever. And here was another life going away for ever. She did not doubt it for one instant; and when the physician, who had known her from her girlhood, gravely took her hand, and whispered to her that there was no hope, the dying man lying insensible to any sight or sound, she shuddered strongly from head to foot, but she did not weep, or shrink from the touch or the voice.

From the senseless figure upon the bed, over which the strange doctor was stooping, his fingers

busy with hopeless investigations at the heart and the wrist—from the ghastly distorted face, so much more terrible, with its rouge and cosmetics, its wig and its pearl powder all removed, than any face of reverend old age, however worn and wasted, can ever be—from the limp, bluish hand lying upon the coverlet, with the heavy seal-ring and its pretentious blazon, with the showy golden buttons hanging from the loosened sleeve—Katharine’s haggard gaze roamed over the room almost unconsciously. It was in most respects the same as when she had inhabited it; but several of her father’s special belongings had been brought from the den, and occupied the place of the feminine properties dispossessed. Her dressing-table, none too large for Mr. Guyon’s requirements, was in its accustomed place, and the long glass had not been moved. But the writing-table she had been accustomed to use was there no longer, and in its place, in the recess beside the fireplace, stood a large cabinet, whose heavy doors closed over a range of wide, shallow shelves, and also shut in a desk. A basket, half full of scraps of torn paper,

stood between the burly carved legs of this old-fashioned piece of furniture; and in front of it was the well-worn red-leather arm-chair which Katharine remembered from her babyhood. The clothes which had been taken off the insensible man were lying in a heap over the back of this chair—bright in colour, juvenile in cut, and painful to see, when one glanced from them to their wearer of a few hours ago. A bunch of keys had fallen from the gaping coat-pocket upon the ground, where it lay with a few crumpled papers, a card of the races being conspicuous among them.

“I believe I can do no more,” said the strange doctor, as at length he relinquished his hopeless task. Then the two left the room together, and after a little Katharine’s old friend returned. By this time she had drawn a chair to the bedside, and was seated there, gazing fixedly on the rigid face, which looked as though death itself, when it should come, would not seal it more utterly up from all impressions of the outer world. She was lost in thought, and was quite passive while the doctor gave his final directions to the housekeeper,

who was to remain all night with the dying man. She understood him to say that he must go home now (he lived close by), but was to be summoned if any change took place. He gave a few simple directions, which the two women could carry out, and which were of a merely perfunctory character, and designed to relieve them by giving them occupation, rather than the patient, for whom there was nothing more to be done until the undertaker's turn should have arrived; and he went away, whispering to Katharine that if he were not sent for sooner, he would be with her at seven on the following morning.

The night wore on, and Katharine and Mrs. Clarke kept their terrible watch. They were for the most part quite silent; the one in the chair beside the bed, the other seated at the fireside, and coming from time to time to gaze disconsolately upon the dying man. No weariness came upon Katharine as the hours crept on. The strong excitement kept her up; and as she administered the few cares of which her father's condition allowed, the enforced composure of her manner

did not break down. The silence of the room was awful, as silence under such circumstances always is ; the clock upon the chimney-piece ticked loudly, the showy gold watch, with its trumpery bunch of trinkets, which had been deposited upon the dressing-table, also ticked on, till late in the small hours, when it stopped. The fire burned low and dim, and flickered upon the housekeeper's weary figure in the deep arm-chair, and upon the ribbons of her cap, as her head nodded abruptly forward, in the uneasy snatches of broken slumber. Sometimes a little flame sprung out and glimmered upon the silken folds of Katharine's rich dress, upon the gold bracelet of the arm laid upon the bed, upon the pale stern face keeping its wakeful watch.

There were times during those dread hours when the dying man groaned heavily ; and then the two women would bend eagerly over him, using the prescribed restoratives, and trying to discern some symptom of consciousness, even of pain ; but it never came. Ned Guyon had spoken his last words—had experienced his last emotion

in this world; and what they were has already been told.

It was about four in the morning; and the cold dismal chill peculiar to that ghastly hour had stolen over the room; and Katharine had begun to shiver and yawn under its influence. Mrs. Clarke woke with a guilty start, softly raked the fire together and replenished it, and, in answer to Katharine's beckoning finger, approached the bed.

"There's no change—no, no change," said Mrs. Clarke; and she shook her head gravely.

"Are you sure?" said Katharine; "I thought his face looked colder and grayer. Don't you think the eyelids are heavier and more nearly shut?"

Mrs. Clarke took a candle, and held it close to the wan face. There was no change perceptible to her; and the "muffled-drum" beat of the heart told of life still lingering.

"No, my dear," said the old woman compassionately; "he is not gone yet, nor going; but Lor' ha' mercy, how cold you are! why, you're shivering. I'll go and fetch a teapot and a kettle,

and make some tea. No ; the kitchen-fire is alight. If you don't mind being alone, I'll make it downstairs ; it's quicker done ; and I am sure you want it."

"I do want it, Clarke," said Katharine, shuddering. "The dawn is coming, I suppose ; and the cold strikes into my blood. I shall be glad of the tea."

Mrs. Clarke went away on her errand. Katharine, all her senses quickened, heard her step upon each stair until she reached the hall. A strange, lonely, nervous feeling came over her, and she rose from her seat by the bedside, and went over to the fireplace. As she stood idly by the chimneypiece, an unusually strong flicker of the flame shone upon something bright which lay upon the ground. Katharine stooped, and picked up a bunch of keys and a handful of crumpled papers. She laid the keys upon the mantel-shelf, and mechanically turned over the papers. The card of the races she threw into the fire, the others she smoothed out ; and finding some memoranda apparently containing calculations among them, she

thought it would be well to put them away safely. With the intention of doing so, she took up the keys again, and opened the heavy door of the oak cabinet.

Mr. Guyon, like many men devoted to the business of pleasure, was very orderly in his arrangements, and kept all his papers with an enviable degree of precision. The long shallow drawers of the cabinet had each its neat parchment label, indicating the contents; and the lowest of the range bore the superscription, “miscellaneous letters.” Katharine pulled the pendent brass ring attached to this drawer with a little more force than was necessary to open it. The drawer slid out easily, and the whole of its contents were exposed to her view. At the back, in the right-hand corner, lay a small packet, slipped into an elastic band, on which her quick eye caught her own name, written in a hand she knew well—her own name, as it had been—“Miss Guyon”—and a date scrawled in the corner. The blood rushed hotly into Katharine’s face as she took the packet out of the drawer and carried it to the fireplace,

where she examined it by the light of a slender lamp. It consisted of four letters: the ~~envelope~~ that on which her name was written: the ~~envelope~~ next was placed in the hand so that the address did not show; but a line was written on it in V. Guyon's hand—"shown to R. S."

Katharine sat down in the chair vacated by the housekeeper, and deliberated. In her hand she held a packet of papers, which she felt concerned her deeply. Here was a letter in Germain Frere's hand—a letter whose date was that of the very day which had begun her hopeless waiting and waiting, in the time which, until this moment, had seemed so far, so illimitably past, but now in an instant was brought near again, and revived in all its pain and anger. Here was a letter which must have been written that day when he had sent her the music and his card, as she had believed without a word. A vague sense of treachery, something which led her intuitively to an approximate suspicion of the truth, came into Katharine's mind. She glanced at the bed, and turned away trembling. What was she about to

learn? Something, she felt instinctively, which must change all her life. Then she drew out the note directed to "Miss Guyon," and read it. It was that which Gordon Frere had written to Katharine, from Cramer's, after he had left Charles Yeldham, with the intention of starting by the next train, on his pilgrimage of hope, to his father's rectory. It was a bright gay note, with a pleasant allusion to their talk about the music; a strong expression of disappointment about Katharine's not being at the ball; an intimation that his absence would be as short as he could make it; and that he hoped to see her immediately on his return. Katharine dropped the hand that held the note heavily into her lap; had she received it, what might she have been now? An undefined fear stole over her; this was foul play; this letter had been intercepted. What did it mean? She drew out the second in order, and opened it. Again, a letter from Gordon Frere; again, a letter to her—a passionate, tender, pleading, frank, hopeful letter—such a letter as a girl might well be glad and proud to receive from the man she

loved; such a letter as Katharine had dreamed of, had hoped for, had longed for, in the days that were gone. It was that which Gordon had written from his father's house in the full flush of his delight, and the perfect but not presumptuous assurance of her love. Deadly cold and sickness crept over Katharine as she read this letter; her limbs grew heavy, her sight grew dim, her head grew dizzy. "I must be near fainting," she thought; "and they are not all read." She forced herself to rise from her chair, and went to the dressing-table, where she found water and *eau-de-cologne*. She drank a glassful of the mixture, and then returned to her task. All this time—it was in reality only a few minutes—the insensible form upon the bed lay motionless and silent.

The third letter was a short one, also written by Gordon Frere, and addressed to Mr. Guyon. It was a straightforward, manly letter, in which the writer acknowledged his unworthiness of the blessing he asked with more sincerity than such matter-of-course acknowledgments usually convey, and set forth his modest confidence in Miss

Guyon's consent to become his wife. Gordon stated the prospects then opening upon him; and finally, in accordance with his father's wish, formally requested Mr. Guyon's permission to address his daughter. (The old-fashioned punctilio of the good rector had helped the unscrupulous schemer considerably, as the virtues of good men are not seldom found to aid the devices of knaves.)

The fourth letter, which was endorsed with the words "shown to R. S.," and was the last contained in the packet, was in Mr. Guyon's handwriting. As his daughter read it, all the truth revealed itself to her; all the baseness of which she had been the victim stood in its revolting nakedness before her eyes. As she read the flowery sentences in which Mr. Guyon condoled with his "dear young friend," and pitied himself for being the medium of so painful a communication, a grasp seemed to tighten upon her throat and to press down her heart: still she read on, —read that her father had written, on her behalf, to the effect that, feeling she had been so unfortunate as to have conveyed a totally unfounded

impression to Mr. Frere, she had shrunk from a personal explanation, and felt sure that, when Mr. Frere should know that she was engaged to Mr. Streightley, and their marriage was to take place very shortly, he would excuse her making a written one;—read that, though Mr. Guyon hoped their future friendship would be quite unaltered, he trusted Mr. Frere would abstain from any communication, either personal or by letter, for the present, as such would agitate Miss Guyon, and cause much unpleasantness; and that she and her father united in every good wish for Mr. Frere's future welfare.

Katharine read this terrible letter over many times—not before she understood and believed the revelation it made, but before she got the reality of it into her mind, before it connected itself with her own self, and showed her the past and present laid utterly waste. It was her father who had done this,—her father! who had been kind to her, too, after a fashion—her father! Ay, *and her husband!*

Shown to R. S. Shown to Robert Streightley

—shown to the rich man who had bought her. Well, she had often told herself, bitterly enough, that it was a bargain, a purchase; but now it was more—it was a theft! Stolen from the man who loved her! made to believe him false, duped—wretchedly, ignominiously duped! Good God! how was she to bear this knowledge? *Shown to R. S.* There were the words, the fatal, damning proofs which convicted the two men who were her nearest friends, her only protectors, of the foulest conspiracy that ever two rascals concocted against an unhappy woman. She crushed the letters in her clenched hand, and rose to her feet. She had taken a step forward, her eyes flaming, her face white and fixed,—far more changed than by the earlier, weaker shock of this dreadful night,—when the door was softly opened, and the housekeeper came in, carrying a trayful of tea-things. At the sight of Katharine's face she set the tray down, and said, in a hurried whisper:

"Were you coming to call me? Is he worse?"

"I—I don't know," stammered Katharine;

"I think so."

"Poor dear!" said the woman compassionately; "no wonder you are frightened. I shouldn't have left you alone."

Then she bent down to look closely at the patient. Closer and closer still: she felt the hand, the heart; she touched the chill forehead. Katharine stood still and watched her, quite silent, the papers in her clenched hand covered by the folds of her dress. The woman's touch suddenly became more reverent as she raised the chin and made the passive blue lips meet, as she pressed her fingers on the half-shut eyelids, and closed them over the sightless eyes. When she had drawn the sheet over the still, stiffening face, she turned to the dead man's daughter, and said,

"Come away, my dear. It's all over. I must send for the doctor, as he told me."

* * * * *

The wintry sun had been up for many hours when Mrs. Streightley returned to her own house from that in which her father lay dead. She had sent for Mr. Guyon's solicitor, and had a long interview with him in the dingy dining-room.

She had been wonderfully calm and collected, the servants said; but she had not reëntered her father's room, though "the corpse is laid out beautiful, to be sure," said James to the coachman from Portland Place, while that functionary awaited his mistress, or her orders. She came out, looking pale and absent; and she took no notice of the sympathising looks of her maid when she reached home. She went at once to her room, declined all attendance, and directed that she was not to be disturbed.

The servants wondered whether their master had been sent for; had James been sent to the telegraph office, did coachman know? Coachman knew nothing about it; but the lawyer was there, —perhaps he had sent for master. And then they discussed the death, and the dead man, with much freedom and candour.

At about two o'clock in the afternoon the footman, doing his turn of duty by looking out of window in the hall of Mr. Streightley's house, was surprised by seeing his mistress come downstairs in her bonnet and cloak, with her veil down, and

carrying a square parcel in her hand, "which it looked like a box done up in paper," the man said afterwards, when questioned concerning the circumstance.

"Open the door, William, if you please," said Mrs. Streightley.

The man obeyed, wondering.

"I am going to Queen Anne Street. I don't require the carriage," said Katharine. And she passed out of the door, and out of the footman's sight.

CHAPTER XII.

RETRIBUTION.

WHILE the events recorded in the last chapter had been taking place, Robert Streightley had been down to Middlemeads to give the necessary orders for the immediate reduction of the establishment there. It was an act over which a great many people would have been sillily sentimental, but one which affected Robert Streightley very little indeed. The stately old mansion had never been his home, though it had contained his wife and his household gods; he had never had the same regard for it as for the dingy Brixton villa, where every thing was so old and mean and common. Even when he first bought the place, and inhabited it in the early days of his wedded life, long before the falseness of his position and the chance of some

day being compelled to return to his old and quiet mode of life had dawned on him, he had felt uncomfortable and out of place at Middlemeads. But latterly, as speculation after speculation "went wrong" in the City, and as scarcely a week passed without the addition of some new improvement, the importation of some fresh luxury by Katharine's orders, the negative feelings with which he had regarded that estate, for the possession of which he was so much envied and hated, grew into positive dislike; he remembered that the first time he had seen the place was the day before he had had that fatal conference with Mr. Guyon, and he began to associate most of his troubles with the name of Middlemeads.

He would have sold the place at once but for two reasons; the first and chiefest of which was, that Katharine took great pleasure and interest in it—more pleasure and interest than she had taken in any thing else during her married life; the other, that the sale of his country estate, which, with the county people who visited there and the swells whom he entertained, had been so much

talked of among his friends in the City, would be a confession of weakness which Robert Streightley shrunk from meeting. Besides, all would probably come right very soon; the house of Streightley and Son was too firmly established not to be able to stand a shock or two; and by reducing the establishment at Middlemeads he should effect a considerable saving, while the sale of a portion of the valuable timber on the estate would bring in a sum of ready money, of which he was greatly in need. This done, he drove off to the railway, caught the up-train, and was on his way to London.

He was alone in the railway carriage; there was no old gentleman rustling a newspaper, no young gentleman playing with his watch-chain, no humorous children to trample on his feet,—nothing to disturb the train of thought into which he fell. By no means a pleasant train of thought, for a dead weight was at his heart, and he felt a horrible sense of something—he knew not what—but some calamity hanging over him. Something, some trifle had reminded him of the day on which

Mr. Guyon had told him of Frere's proposal for Katharine's hand, and now he could not get the subject out of his head : the words seemed to ring in his ears ; and when he closed his eyes, that peculiar look with which Mr. Guyon had suggested the suppression of Frere's letter seemed to rise before him. What had his life been since then ? He had married Katharine ! O yes, she was his wife ; but had he ever obtained from her one grain of confidence, one look of love ? Had not his business transactions gone wrong ever since ? Had he not suffered under perpetual qualms of conscience ever since he became a silent confederate in that monstrous fraud of which Katharine, his wife, was one of the victims ? In his case, at least, retribution had not been long delayed ; the first mutterings of the avenging storm had been long since heard, and now something told him that the storm itself was close at hand. He would welcome it in all its fury, though it stripped him of all his wealth and left him to begin life anew, if it only could bear away on its wings the barrier existing between Katharine and himself ; if it only

enabled him to prove to her his worship of her ; if it only raised in her for him one tithe of the love with which he regarded her.

It was a dark, dull, damp evening when Robert Streightley alighted from the cab in which he had driven from the railway, and knocked at his own door in Portland Place. The enormously stout middle-aged man, who for a by no means poor wage consented to pass his life in alternately sitting in and getting out of a porter's chair, like a leathern bee-hive, was usually sufficiently on the alert to recognise his master's rap, and give him speedy admission ; but on this occasion Mr. Streightley had to knock three times, and when the porter opened the door there was a strange odd look on his face, which made his master think he had been drinking. Robert passed by him quickly and went into the library, where he rang the bell. It was answered by William, the footman who had opened the door for Katharine when she left the house.

“ Is your mistress in the Cedar-room ? is there any one with her ? ”

"Missus is not in the Cedar-room, sir, and there is no pusson with her, as I knows of. Missus ain't at home, sir."

"O, very well. What time did she order the carriage to fetch her?"

"The carriage isn't ordered at all, sir. Missus said she wouldn't want the carriage."

"Do you know where your mistress is?"

"She said she was goin' to Queen Anne Street, sir."

"Very good. I'll go across myself and bring her home."

"Begging your pardon, sir, I don't think you'll find missus at Queen Anne Street, sir."

"No! what do you mean?"

"Why, sir, Mamzell Augustus went across about six o'clock, sir, to know whether missus was comin' home to dress, sir, and they said at Queen Anne Street that she'd never been there since she left in the morning."

"Never been there? and—O, she's probably gone out with Mr. Guyon."

"Good Lord, sir!" said the footman, startled

out of all propriety; "I forgot, sir, you didn't know—the hold gent's dead!"

"Dead? Mr. Guyon dead?"

"Yes, sir; had a fit at Croydon races last evening, sir, and died hearly this morning. Beg pardon, sir, shall I tell Anderson to bring you a glass of brandy, sir?"

"Eh? No, thank you, William—yes—you may, if you please. I feel—" and Robert Streightley clutched at a chair near him, and sunk into it, with trembling limbs and beating heart.

Mr. Anderson, the staid butler, brought a small decanter of brandy, filled a liqueur-glass, and handed it to his master, whose hand shook so that the glass rattled against his teeth. After the discreet domestic had withdrawn, Robert Streightley sat in his chair, glaring straight before him, revolving in his mind a hundred subjects, all equally dismal. Katharine's absence, first of all, what could that mean? what could have induced it? was it in any way connected with Mr. Guyon's death? Mr. Guyon's death, poor man! not one with whom he had any thing in common except—that horrible

conspiracy always cropping up! Mr. Guyon dead? well, then, there was an end to the chance of any betrayal of that mystery; he might rest secure that—Good God! where could his wife have gone to? Could she have learned—no; that was impossible. Still, why had she left his house, without leaving any trace of her whereabouts? Lady Henmarsh was not in town; but she might have gone to some other friend's house, where she could receive that womanly kindness and consolation which, in the first shock of her grief, her heart sought for. It was absurd in him to have imagined that, under such circumstances, she would remain in her own house alone, without a soul to speak to in confidence. She would return soon; he would wait up to receive her.

So through the long hours of that night, having dismissed the household to rest, Robert Streightley sat in his library, the door of which opened on the hall, in eager anticipation of his wife's return. The sharp ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece seemed running a race with the solemn ticking of the clock in the hall; the rumble of the cabs out-

side, the footfalls of the passers-by, fell with monotonous solemnity on his ear ; the dead silence at the back of the house, broken only by the wailing of dissipated cats, oppressed him ; and the keen anguish of his own thoughts made him occasionally clasp his forehead and utter some ejaculation ; but still he sat there, looking out into the dimly-lighted hall, and waiting for his wife's return. That Mr. Guyon was dead, had died suddenly and in a ghastly manner, he yet scarcely realised : he had heard the fact, and that was all ; he had not thought over it ; his thoughts were entirely occupied with the fact of his wife's absence. To account for this he had now no possible satisfactory theory. Had she been persuaded to remain at the house of any friend to whom she might have gone, a message to that effect would surely have been sent to Portland Place. The shock of her father's death might have been too much for her ; and in walking to the house of some friend she might have been seized with illness ; at that moment she might be lying unknown in some hospital, or—and as the thought came across him

Robert Streightley started to his feet, his mind half made up to sally forth at once, and set the detective force at work to discover Katharine's whereabouts. But before he had advanced a few steps his cautious common-sense came to his aid. He was a weak, hot-headed fool, and his usual powers of reasoning had been, he argued to himself, a little impaired by the mental strain to which during the last few weeks he had been subjected. Nothing was known yet of his wife's disappearance. Even to the household their mistress's absence was a mere subject for discussion over the supper-beer, where no one had a substantial theory to breach, but all arrived at a general conclusion, originally propounded by the cook, that "master not being at home, she'd gone away, poor soul, to some other friend's nigh by; and not expectin' him, they'd kep her, as was only right and jest when she was in trouble." If he were to raise a hue and cry, it would become at once a public scandal; and from a public scandal, from the mere thought of the knowledge that his friends were discussing his domestic affairs, Ro-

bert Streightley shrunk in horror and dismay. No; he would take no step, at least for the next few hours; morning must bring the solution of the mystery, and for that solution he would wait. Arrived at this determination, he turned out his lamp, and crept up stairs to bed.

To bed, but not to sleep. For hours he lay tossing on his hot pillow, racked with dismal doubt. Where was his wife? To whom had she gone in her time of trouble? That she had not remained to share her grief with him would have been, under other circumstances, a sufficient cause of dissatisfaction for her husband; but Robert, calmly reviewing—as calmly as he could, poor fellow—his real position in the dull dead watches of the night, was forced to acknowledge to himself that there had never been any confidence between him and Katharine, which would warrant him in looking for such a display of affection. On the other hand, a doubt of her having infringed the strictest rules of propriety never crossed his mind. Never, during the whole course of her married life, had she given him occasion

for the slightest suspicion of jealousy. With all her undeniable beauty, with all the attention she perforce commanded, she had not shown the smallest symptom of coquetry. If she had not come heart-whole to him, if hers had not been a love-match, if he had not been the *beau ideal* of her girlish fancy, by no act of hers could that have become patent to the ever-watchful, always censorious world. Where, then, was she gone? Her position was so peculiar, even to Robert's unworldly view; she had lived so self-contained a life since her marriage, that she could scarcely be said to have any special friends. Acquaintances she had by the score; but one does not go to acquaintances in the time of trouble; while her quondam chaperone, Lady Henmarsh, her only intimate, was away, and Mrs. Stanbourne, from whom she might justly have sought consolation, was far from England. Where could she have gone? Still revolving this question in his mind, Robert, just as day was dawning, fell into a fitful feverish sleep, haunted by horrible dreams, in which he and Katharine, the dead man and Gordon

Frere, all played conspicuous parts, being mixed up in that dreadfully grotesque manner only possible under dream-influence.

He seemed only to have closed his eyes—in reality he had been asleep but a couple of hours—when he was aroused by a knocking at the door, and the voice of his servant, who, according to usual custom, had brought the post-letters to his bedroom door. In an instant Streightley sprang up, all the events of the previous day—Guyon's death, Katharine's absence, his own misery—all flashing upon him at once, opened the door, and there, on the top of the little heap, saw a letter in Katharine's well-known hand. He seized it instantly, was about to tear it open, and stopped—stopped, for his heart was beating loudly, and there was a choking sensation in his throat, and a film over his eyes. He sat down on a chair, placed the letter on the table beside him, and passed his hand over his brow. The whole room reeled before him; he felt that he must, and yet that he dared not break that seal. The answer to the question that had been tormenting him all

night, the key to the enigma of his wife's departure, lay before him, and yet he hesitated to avail himself of it. He remained irresolute for some minutes; then he took up the letter quietly, opened it, and read as follows :

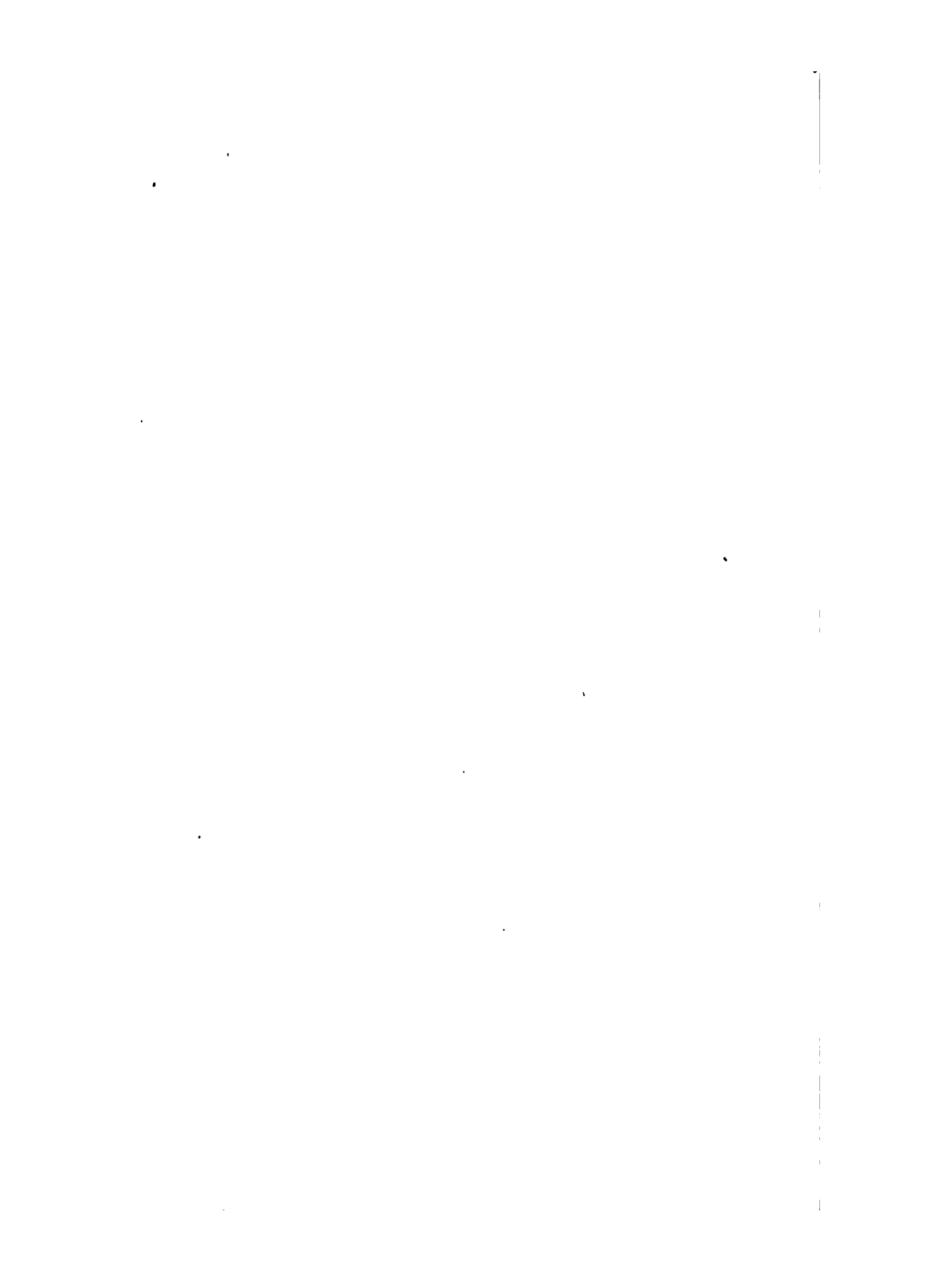
“ This is the last time I shall ever hold communication with you, and therefore it is well that I should be explicit. By the merest accident I have become acquainted with the plot by which the whole of my life was maimed and perverted, my happiness blighted, my feelings trampled on, and my girlish pride mortified and humbled. In that plot were two conspirators; one who basely sold an honest, trusting, loving girl—his daughter; the other, who, by the mere accidental advantage of his wealth, was enabled to buy that girl for his wife. By neither, save as a mere matter of barter, something to be bought and sold, was I, that girl, considered. One of the plotters has been removed beyond the reach of my vengeance, and I shall take care to prevent the other from any opportunity of further villany, so far as I am concerned. I have turned my back upon my father's

corpse, and I turn my back on your house. I leave behind me all the price at which you purchased me; I take nothing with me but my mother's jewels, to which I suppose I have a right, and the unalterable determination which I have formed; and that is, in this world or the next, living or dying, never to forgive you, Robert Streightley, for your share in my degradation, and never to look upon your face again.—K. S.”

END OF VOL. II.

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